Undergraduate study in English

Renaissance Comedy: Shakespeare and Jonson

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EN1020, 033E020

2012
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Advice to students registered on the following programmes – BA English (New Regulations), Diploma of Higher Education in English and Certificate of Higher Education in English: This subject guide is for a Level 4, 30-credit course offered as part of the University of London International Programmes in English.
Course learning outcomes and assessment criteria ........................................... 1
Learning outcomes .......................................................................................................................... 1
Mode of assessment .......................................................................................................................... 1
Assessment criteria ............................................................................................................................ 1
Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 3
Aims and objectives ........................................................................................................................... 3
Using this subject guide .................................................................................................................... 3
Syllabus .............................................................................................................................................. 4
Reading ........................................................................................................................................... 5
Suggested study syllabus and recommended reading ................................................................. 10
Study questions for suggested study topics .................................................................................... 13
Online resources .............................................................................................................................. 15
Method of assessment ...................................................................................................................... 16
Chapter 1: Shakespeare, Jonson and the Renaissance ........................................ 19
Recommended reading ..................................................................................................................... 19
Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 19
William Shakespeare ....................................................................................................................... 19
Ben Jonson .......................................................................................................................................... 20
Editions of the plays ....................................................................................................................... 21
The Renaissance and ‘early modern’ periods ..................................................................................... 23
Learning outcomes ........................................................................................................................... 23
Chapter 2: Defining comedy ............................................................................. 25
Recommended reading ..................................................................................................................... 25
Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 25
Clowns and comedians .................................................................................................................... 27
Pastoral comedy and city comedy ................................................................................................... 27
Reading comedy ............................................................................................................................. 29
Learning outcomes ........................................................................................................................... 30
Chapter 3: The context of the plays ............................................................. 31
Recommended reading ..................................................................................................................... 31
The rise of the theatres ...................................................................................................................... 31
Early-modern stages and staging ................................................................................................. 32
The audience ....................................................................................................................................... 34
Patronage and censorship ............................................................................................................. 34
Learning outcomes ........................................................................................................................... 36
Chapter 4: Contextualising extracts ............................................................. 37
Recommended reading ..................................................................................................................... 37
Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 37
Suggested approach ......................................................................................................................... 37
Is this passage in blank verse or in prose? ....................................................................................... 38
Learning outcomes ........................................................................................................................... 40
Chapter 5: Single text analysis: Shakespeare, As You Like It............... 41
  Recommended reading................................................................. 41
  Introduction.................................................................................... 41
  Pastoral .......................................................................................... 41
  A pastoral critique ......................................................................... 42
  Festivity .......................................................................................... 43
  Green Worlds .................................................................................. 44
  Love ............................................................................................... 45
  Learning outcomes .......................................................................... 47
  Sample examination questions on As You Like It ....................... 47
  Suggestions for further study ....................................................... 47

Chapter 6: Comparative analysis .................................................... 49
  Recommended reading................................................................. 49
  Introduction.................................................................................... 49
  Comic transformation in The Taming of the Shrew, The Merchant of Venice and
  The Alchemist ................................................................................ 49
  Learning outcomes .......................................................................... 55
  Sample examination questions for Section C ............................... 55
  Suggestions for further study ....................................................... 55

Appendix 1: Examination paper 2010 ............................................ 57

Appendix 2: Examiners’ report 2010 .............................................. 65
  Advice to candidates on how Examiners calculate marks .......... 65
  General remarks ............................................................................ 66
  What the Examiners would like to have seen ............................ 66
  Section A ....................................................................................... 66
  Section B ........................................................................................ 68
  Section C ....................................................................................... 71
This course provides students with an introduction to the works of Shakespeare and Jonson within the genre of 'comedy', and seeks to draw attention to the principles of classification which enable these plays to be seen as forming a group. Starting with the hypothesis that the plays themselves may problematize such formulations, the course will examine the cultural specificity of the term ‘comedy’, and the extent to which these plays are part of a process which redefined the role of drama in Elizabethan/Jacobean society. The plays will be treated primarily as literary texts but students will be encouraged to consider the possibilities for interpretation which a 'stage-centred' critical approach produces. The plays will be placed in the context of a new dramatic practice which arose within a London of competing commercial and political interests, and students will be required to grasp an overview of the forces shaping the creative production of Shakespeare and Jonson. The demands of the market for which the dramatists were producing, the operation of patronage, the expectations of theatre audiences, and the role of censorship will be considered, and the course will attempt to read through the plays to find the 'marks' of these influences.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the course you should:

• have read the comic dramatic writings of Shakespeare and Jonson
• have an understanding of the creative context in which the texts have their origin, namely the world of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, and the social context in which it operated
• have some understanding of critical developments in the field
• know and be able to apply the terminology associated with the period
• be able to develop your own critical approaches to the plays.

Mode of assessment

One three-hour unseen examination.

Assessment criteria

You will be assessed according to your ability to:

• place an unseen extract in the context of the play from which it is drawn, with reference to its relationship to the rest of that play
• extend this notion of context by relating the unseen extract to other works by either dramatist, or to the works of its author taken collectively
• comment on the themes, use of language and dramatic interaction in the work of both dramatists
• demonstrate detailed knowledge of a selection of plays by both dramatists
• discuss plays by both dramatists in terms of a particular topic or topics
• carry out comparative analysis between the works of Shakespeare and Jonson, identifying parallels and distinctions between different plays and placing them in their social and creative contexts.
Introduction

Aims and objectives

This subject guide aims to provide you with an introduction to the comedies of William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. This guide has been designed to:

- help you become familiar with the comic dramatic writings of Shakespeare and Jonson, of which the 12 texts on the syllabus form the largest part
- develop your understanding of the creative context in which the texts have their origin, namely the world of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, and the social context in which it operated
- indicate the major critical works and studies that have been written on the topic, and direct the reader to recent critical developments in the field
- introduce the terminology associated with the period
- help you to develop your own critical approaches to the plays.

Using this subject guide

This subject guide is intended to serve as a starting point for your own study plan. The approaches to the texts taken here should serve as models for developing your own approaches. The best start you can give yourself is to read (or re-read) all the plays on the syllabus. Only then, in conjunction with this subject guide, should you begin to decide which plays and which topics you intend to examine in more detail. The topics raised in this guide are intended to outline areas of study, and none is treated exhaustively here. You may, of course, wish to examine topics this guide does not mention. In all events, the reading lists given here will help you determine what is considered the most essential secondary reading. It is up to you to decide what you supplement this essential reading with, and you will find that the subject-based bibliographies at the end of certain secondary texts will help you.

This guide does not constitute the subject itself, but it is an example of how you could construct an appropriate course of study and devise appropriate ways of studying the material you choose. It also indicates the range of material that is the minimum amount necessary to face the exam with confidence. Simple regurgitation in the examination of the illustrative material in this subject guide will be regarded as plagiarism and heavily penalised. You must adapt such material in ways appropriate to your own chosen syllabus of study. Examiners will always look unfavourably at examinations composed of answers that draw solely on the illustrative material provided in this subject guide.

Each chapter starts with a suggested reading list for the topic(s) covered in that chapter. It is divided into ‘essential reading’ and ‘recommended reading’. The former sets out the texts we discuss in the
The latter list includes a number of books and articles that will enhance your knowledge and understanding of the topic.

You will find activities (e.g. consider this point, study this chapter) in boxes throughout the text. These have been designed to help you to apply what you are reading.

**Syllabus**

The 12 plays on the syllabus are:

**Shakespeare**
- *Much Ado About Nothing*
- *As You Like It*
- *The Merchant of Venice*
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *The Taming of the Shrew*
- *Twelfth Night.*

**Jonson**
- *Bartholomew Fair*
- *Volpone*
- *The Alchemist*
- *Every Man in his Humour*
- *Eastward Ho!*
- *Epicoene; or The Silent Woman.*

These are the plays the examination questions will refer to, and it is desirable that you concentrate on these texts, although there is no need to limit yourself to them exclusively. Section A of the examination paper requires you to contextualise extracts taken from the 12 plays listed above, but you may of course refer to other plays elsewhere in your examination answers. We recommend that you attempt to divide your time equally between the study of both authors. As a minimum you should aim to develop a detailed knowledge of at least six plays spanning both dramatists.

It is also important that you spend the same amount of time on secondary reading, such as critical works and background material, as you do on the plays themselves. You will not be expected to know all the plays equally well, so you should choose those in which you are most interested and prepare answers on those.

To focus your study, it will be helpful if you concentrate on certain themes and topics that you can use to compare one play with another. The following is a list of topics that you will find helpful:

- the definition of comedy
- the cultural specificity of ‘comedy’
- cross-dressing
- the comparison of festive comedy and city comedy
• gender and class transgression
• disguise
• characterisation and comic stereotype
• marriage as a site of conflict
• the economics of marriage
• comic quibbling
• bawdy and sexual joking
• inversions of the social order
• humiliation and punishment
• the Fool/Clown
• the structure of plots and sub-plots
• the ‘play-within-the-play’
• the comedy of humours
• the dramatic unities
• dramatic structure
• comic forms.

Take some time to consider how the above list of topics relates to the texts on the syllabus. It will be of great value to you as a student if you can begin to think of literary analysis in terms of a text’s relationship to a series of themes and topics, and start to analyse them according to a series of distinct topic headings. See how a text fits under some, or all, of these headings. Literary study is about the close critical analysis of texts, and not simply describing their plots or demonstrating your knowledge of what happens in them.

Please be aware that not all of these topics will be discussed in this subject guide, and you should undertake independent study in order to move beyond the scope of this analysis.

Reading

Primary texts

Shakespeare


Renaissance Comedy: Shakespeare and Jonson

( Unlike the Riverside ) and is somewhat radical in editorial policy, but is extremely good value in its Compact Edition form. As stated below, particularly good single editions exist in the Arden series (especially the third editions) and the Oxford World’s Classics editions (both assorted editors).

Jonson

The New Mermaid series of individual play texts is highly recommended:


Equally good is the ‘Revels Plays’ series, which currently includes three of our texts:


A good collection is the World Classics volume, however, this does not contain Epicoene or Eastward Ho!


Reference works

The cultural milieu


Renaissance Comedy: Shakespeare and Jonson


**Criticism**

**Shakespeare**


**Jonson**


**Theatre conditions**


**Suggested study syllabus and recommended reading**

The following is a sample 20-week outline to give you an idea of how you could construct an appropriate syllabus for this course.

**Week 1**

Background reading on the general history and theatrical conditions of English Renaissance drama.
Introduction

Recommended reading


Week 2

Background reading on the cultural and literary contexts pertaining to English Renaissance comedy in general, and to the work of Shakespeare and Jonson in particular.

Recommended reading


Week 3

Topic study: Pastoral, Shakespearean and festive comedy (see Chapter 5 below).

Weeks 4–9


Recommended reading


Week 10

Topic study: Crossing gender boundaries in Shakespearean comedy.

Recommended reading


Week 11

Topic study: City and citizen comedy.

**Recommended reading**


Weeks 12–17

Author study: Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist, Bartholomew Fair, Eastward Ho!, Epicoene, Every Man in his Humour, Volpone.*

**Recommended reading**


Week 18

Topic study: Comedy, satire, politics.

**Recommended reading**


Week 19

Topic study: Comedy and transformation (see Chapter 6 below).
Week 20
Revision. Practice of one-hour timed answers to previous examination papers.

**Study questions for suggested study topics**

Week 1
See Chapter 3 below.

Week 2
See Chapter 2 below.

Week 3
See Chapter 5 below.

Weeks 4–9
- What is the relationship between language, word play and romance in Shakespeare's comedies?
- Consider the contrast of romantic and anti-romantic attitudes to love and marriage in Shakespearean comedy.
- Consider the role of the wood outside Athens or the space between the two courts of Illyria. What kinds of locations are they, and how do they serve the drama?
- To what extent might Shakespearean comedy be said to dramatise desires that have been permitted to express themselves, free from prohibitive societal restrictions?
- How important are ideas of ‘nature’ and ‘the natural’ to Shakespearean comedy?
- How does Shakespearean comedy dramatise the relationship between the younger and older generations, and to what purpose?
- What is the relationship between romantic love and sexual bawdy in Shakespearean comedy? Are they treated equally, or is one privileged over the other?

Week 10
- To what extent is femininity only allowed to speak when it is disguised?
- How is sexual morality portrayed in Shakespeare's comedies? How important, for example, is the idea of 'reputation' to women?
- Discuss the relationship of women to 'nature' and 'artifice'.
- To what extent can female sexuality be said to be feared in Shakespearean comedy?
- 'Despite its themes of reconciliation and rebirth, Shakespearean comedy strongly invests in maintaining the status quo.' Discuss this view.
- How do themes of 'wedding and bedding' relate to representations of women in Shakespearean comedy?
All female roles were taken by boys on the early-modern stage. Is it in any way possible to read Shakespearean comedy from a feminist perspective, or are we always viewing patriarchal stereotypes of female behaviour?

Shakespearean comedy offers a unique place for women to express themselves and challenge perceptions of gender in a world otherwise dominated by men. Discuss.

Week 11

- Discuss the relationship of city comedy to the ‘prodigal son’ drama.
- How successfully does Jacobean city comedy model itself on Roman ‘New’ comedy?
- How are the countryside and its inhabitants conceived in Jacobean city comedy?
- In the mercantile world of city comedy, what becomes of interpersonal and familial relationships?
- How is London represented in city comedy?
- How is the idea of civic duty or responsibility treated in city comedy?
- In what ways might city comedy be seen to challenge or lampoon the social hierarchy?
- How does city comedy represent the law?
- Discuss the ways in which city comedy establishes, or fails to establish, a position of moral certainty.

Weeks 12–17

- To what extent does Jonson use ‘characterisation through language’?
- How does Jonson try to create a sense of locality in his comedies?
- ‘A Jonsonian comic plot is a group of subplots collected in one place’ (Gabriele Bernhard Jackson). Consider this statement and its relevance to the sense of closure at the end of Jonsonian comedy.
- Consider the value placed upon chastity in Jonson’s comedies.
- How might the role of the Jonsonian clown be different from the Shakespearean one?
- How important is the role of textual devices like the prologue, the induction and the epilogue to Jonsonian comedy? How does it shape or inform our readings of the texts?
- How consistent is Jonson’s application of the theory of the humours in his comedy?
- To what extent may Jonsonian comedy be seen to conform to the Aristotelian unities of dramatic action?

Week 18

- To what extent might festive or pastoral comedy be seen to possess a political subtext?
• Who are the major targets of early-modern comedy, and what do they represent?
• What is the relationship or attitude of comedy to authority?
• Does satire have political teeth? Or does its comic setting disarm it?
• Consider the idea of ‘licensed transgression’. How might this be a political concept specific to comedy?
• Discuss any direct attacks on non-fictional groups or individuals in the comedy of Shakespeare and Jonson. How do these attacks manifest themselves?

Week 19
• See Chapter 6 below.

Online resources

Please note that additional study resources may be available to you for this course. A particularly important resource is the virtual learning environment (VLE) for the English programme, which you can access via the Student Portal – see the Student handbook for details of how to log in.

If you are registered for Level 4 course(s) on the new programme (BA (New Regulations)/Diploma of Higher Education in English/Certificate of Higher Education in English), then the VLE is the place where you will interact with your assigned tutor group for that course. If you are registered for the BA English (Old Regulations) and the Diploma in English (Old Regulations), then please check the VLE regularly as additional material may be added throughout the year.

Internet resources

Internet resources are to be used with caution, particularly non-academic sites. One of the most important resources is the online collection of scholarly articles: www.jstor.org (to which registered students of the University of London International Programmes have access).

The following websites may be useful, to varying extents:

Shakespeare
http://absoluteshakespeare.com
www.bardweb.net
www.britishshakespeare.ws (interesting materials from an academic association)
www.opensourceshakespeare.org
http://shakespeare.palomar.edu
www.shakespeare-literature.com (useful extracts from the plays)
www.shakespeare-monologues.org (as the name suggests, this treats major speeches)
www.shakespeare-online.com
www.shakespeareplays.co.uk (very basic, quick plot summaries)
www.william-shakespeare.info
Method of assessment

Important: the information and advice given here are based on the examination structure used at the time this guide was written. Please note that subject guides may be used for several years. Because of this we strongly advise you to always check both the current Regulations for relevant information about the examination, and the VLE where you should be advised of any forthcoming changes. You should also carefully check the rubric/instructions on the paper you actually sit and follow those instructions.

You will be assessed by one three-hour examination. The examination paper will be in three parts. You will have to answer one question from each section.

Section A will consist of six short extracts from the plays on the syllabus. The extracts will be anonymous; that is, you will not be told which play a passage is from. There will be three extracts from the work of each dramatist. You will be asked to comment on one of these extracts. In your answer you may discuss any aspect of the text that you feel is appropriate, but you must be able to place the extract in the context of the play from which it is drawn. By ‘context’ we mean the way in which the extract forms part of the play from which it is extracted and its relationship to the rest of that play. You may wish to extend this notion of context by relating the extract to other works by either dramatist, or to the works of its author taken collectively. You will also be asked to comment on the ‘themes, use of language and dramatic interaction’ in the extract you choose.

Section B will consist of a series of questions, half on Shakespeare and half on Jonson. You must choose one of these questions. Here you will be able to demonstrate detailed knowledge of a single play and ability to discuss the play in terms of a particular topic or topics.¹

Section C will contain questions requiring comparative analysis. You will be required to draw parallels and distinctions between different plays and place them in their social and creative contexts. You must write on at least one play by Shakespeare and at least one by Jonson.

In planning your study you should aim to develop a detailed knowledge of at least six plays spanning both dramatists. If you prepare three plays by each dramatist (that is, six in all) there is a one in 400 chance that none of them will be among those appearing in Section A. If you prepare seven plays (three by one dramatist and four by the other) one of them is certain to appear. As well as becoming familiar with the language of the plays by close reading, you should

¹ See p.2 for a list of topics which you might wish to develop.
prepare at least three topics in relation to your chosen plays, and consider ways of relating these topics to the rest of the plays. In this introduction you will be advised to perform certain activities (such as making lists and preparing tables) for the plays we are concerned with. For some of these tasks you should confine yourself only to those plays you are concentrating on, as the instructions indicate.

Please note the general stipulation concerning the presentation of substantially the same material in any two answers. In other courses this might mean avoiding writing two answers on the same text(s), but in this course you may write on the same play(s) in different questions so long as the arguments you make are substantially different.

Examples of useful key questions on the texts not discussed at length in this subject guide appear above.

You will find a Sample examination paper at the end of this subject guide.

Remember, it is important to check the VLE for:

- up-to-date information on examination and assessment arrangements for this course
- where available, past examination papers and Examiners’ reports for the course which give advice on how each question might best be answered.
Chapter 1: Shakespeare, Jonson and the Renaissance

Recommended reading


Introduction

William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson both made their careers in London’s busy theatrical scene during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The work of both men was very popular during their own lifetimes, and they both enjoyed financial success and recognition from their peers in the theatre and at court.

Although you will not need a detailed knowledge of the lives of Shakespeare and Jonson to approach the texts, a brief overview of the careers of the two men shows that they developed very different approaches to drama. This, in turn, affected the kind of plays they produced. You should therefore be able to compare them in this respect.

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare enjoys a privileged position in the hierarchy of English literature. He is generally considered to be at the centre of literary achievement in English, and is often referred to as a ‘genius’ or similar, which can confer upon him an almost semi-divine status. The reasoning and cultural developments that have placed him in this elevated position are beyond the scope of this guide, but it is important to have some awareness of the fact that Shakespeare’s privileged position was not asserted during his lifetime, but a product of later responses to his work in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It will be useful here if you think of Shakespeare simply as a dramatist among the many others working in the theatres at this time, and try to resist any urge that might encourage you to think of his works as ‘better’ than those of anyone else. This is not to denigrate the Shakespearean text at all, but merely to remove any preconceptions you may have and place it in the context that it would have been viewed in at the time of its original performance.

Shakespeare was born on or around 23 April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon and died there on the same day in 1616. In the late 1580s he moved to London and entered the theatrical business, first as an actor and then as a dramatist and shareholder in the Globe Theatre. The
first printed allusion to Shakespeare dates from 1592 in the pamphlet Greene’s Groatsworth of Wit, where he is referred to as an ‘upstart crow… [who] is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country’. The author of this comment, the dramatist and poet Robert Greene, seems to resent Shakespeare as a rival. Interestingly, this is the only contemporary reference that shows any hostility to Shakespeare, as most others speak of his pleasant temperament and quick wit. All other dramatic allusions to Shakespeare made during his time in London are listed in the introduction of Wells and Taylor’s Complete Works.

Most of the documentary evidence of this period of Shakespeare’s life takes the form of official documents, such as contracts and lawsuits. It is clear from these that Shakespeare made a lot of money in London. When he retired to Stratford-upon-Avon he was a very rich man, much of his wealth deriving from lending money at rates of interest beneficial to the lender. This is a biographical fact that has largely been ignored by critics wishing to portray Shakespeare as a natural genius, it being felt that this genius was not compatible with great personal wealth.

Shakespeare’s death is traditionally considered to have been as a result of a fever contracted after a bout of drinking with the poet Michael Drayton and, ironically, Ben Jonson, the latter having something of a fearsome reputation for his capacity for alcohol.

**Ben Jonson**

Unlike his more lauded colleague, Ben Jonson’s position in the literary canon has not always been so certain. The fortunes of the Jonsonian text have been intermittent, with only a small number of his most popular plays receiving regular productions in the three centuries since his death. This is ironic considering the lengths Jonson went to during his career to assert that poets and playwrights were important artists rather than humble artisans.

Jonson, Shakespeare’s junior by nine years, was born in London early in 1573 and died there on 6 August 1637. The documentary evidence shows that Jonson was involved with a theatrical company called the Lord Admiral’s Men during the 1590s. In the autumn of 1598 Jonson killed one of the actors of this company, Gabriel Spencer, in a duel. Jonson was saved from execution for murder thanks to his ability to read and write Latin, which allowed him to claim what was called the ‘Benefit of Clergy’. This legal device, which rested on a distinction between the jurisdiction of state courts and ecclesiastical courts, exempted the learned from sentencing for a first conviction.

In disgrace with the Lord Admiral’s Men for the murder of one of their players, Jonson offered his services to the rival Lord Chamberlain’s Men. In 1598, Every Man in his Humour was performed by them with Shakespeare taking a part. This play made Jonson’s reputation. As well as writing for the public stage, Jonson made a career for himself in the writing of court masques in collaboration with the architect Inigo Jones (with whom he had an acrimonious falling out). These elaborate entertainments became highly developed under King James and Jonson was by far the most successful and prolific exponent of the art form. Jonson gave up writing for the public stage after the failure of his
play *The Devil is an Ass* in 1616 and did not resume until 1625. None of his plays between 1625 and 1633 enjoyed much success, and Jonson died something of a disappointed man.

Jonson has been characterised as a classicist, and certainly his scholarly abilities exceeded Shakespeare’s. When called upon to write a commendatory verse for the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays in 1623, Jonson wrote of Shakespeare’s possession of ‘small Latin, and less Greek’. This has been taken as an accurate estimate of Shakespeare’s schooling, but it is also an assertion of Jonson’s view of himself as a different kind of dramatist to Shakespeare. As has been mentioned, Jonson wanted to foster an idea of the writer as an educated and intellectual individual, whose works were something more than simple entertainments. A comparison of the plays of Shakespeare and Jonson reveals that Jonson was far more interested in reviving and adapting the dramatic models of classical Greece and Rome than his elder counterpart. As a result, he is often considered to be something of an elitist dramatist, whereas Shakespeare’s drama is considered to be more popular in appeal. The final irony of Jonson’s views of the status of the writer is that it is ultimately Shakespeare’s reputation that benefited the most from the idea of the author as genius.

### Editions of the plays

Your first concern should be to gain familiarity with the plays. In practice this means two careful readings of each text. You should be aware that *Epicoene*, or *The Silent Woman* is one text. You may come across a version of *Every Man in his Humour* set in Italy rather than London. This is the text as it appeared in the 1601 quarto (pocket-size) edition of the play, and is not the version we will be considering. We are interested in the play as it appeared in Jonson’s folio *Workes* of 1616.

The best modern editions of Shakespeare’s plays are the single-volume *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, edited by Wells and Taylor and published by Oxford University Press, and *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. The Oxford paperback edition of the former can be bought for around £9 in the United Kingdom and is no doubt the cheapest way to have access to everything that Shakespeare ever wrote. The Norton edition, while more expensive, features an exhaustive introduction to Shakespeare’s life and times, has comprehensive introductions to each play, and a considerable amount of notes at the foot of each page. If you feel that notes are essential to your understanding of the plays, you may well be better off paying the extra for this edition. Another useful edition of the complete works is *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

There are other, cheaper, editions of Shakespeare’s complete works available, especially ‘illustrated’ editions that feature Victorian engravings of scenes from the plays. These are not to be recommended, as they have neither introductions nor notes and the editorial procedures that dictate them are considered somewhat suspect.

Individual editions of all Shakespeare’s plays are available, and of these the Oxford World’s Classics editions (various editors), and the Arden
Shakespeare editions (also various editors) are the best. Both these series feature comprehensive introductions and notes. The Oxford Shakespeare editions are the most up-to-date in terms of critical approach and scholarship, but in recent years the Arden editions have gone into their third series, and several of the plays are available in this series.

As a supplement to any study of Shakespeare's plays you will find that C.T. Onions' *A Shakespeare Glossary* serves very well to explain difficult or archaic words.

Unfortunately there is no single volume edition of Jonson's works which is comparable to the Oxford Shakespeare. The four volume edition edited by G.A. Wilkes, *Ben Jonson: The Complete Plays* is a scholarly, and expensive, collection. It would be better to try to collect a set of modern single-play editions (the *New Mermaids* and the *Revels Plays* series are especially recommended), or alternatively for the sake of economy you might find the Oxford World Classics Series *Ben Jonson: Five Plays* plus any editions of *Epicoene* and *Eastward Ho!* a good way to cover all the plays we are looking at. The final choice may depend on the particular availability of texts in your area.

The quotations used in Section A of the examination paper, and also in this guide, are from the *Wells and Taylor, William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* for the Shakespeare plays and from the New Mermaid single-volume editions for the Jonson plays.

The history of the transmission of these texts (the way in which they have come down to us) has some bearing on our study. In the section ‘The Elizabethan theatrical context’ of this guide, we will consider the effects of the dramatic origins of these texts, and in the section ‘The physical layout of the stage and its effect’ we will look at the conditions under which the plays were performed. We are treating the texts primarily as literary works but it is important to remember that they are also scripts for theatrical production. There is an important difference here between the texts of Shakespeare and the texts of Jonson. Shakespeare appears to have had no interest whatsoever in having his plays published. Many of the texts of his plays published in his lifetime are manifestly corrupt, inasmuch as it seems the words printed could not be those the dramatist wrote. Even those that were printed with the consent and assistance of the theatrical company of which Shakespeare was a major shareholder have errors that Shakespeare made no effort to correct. The first ‘complete works’ of Shakespeare was the First Folio published in 1623, seven years after his death. By contrast, Jonson took great pains over the printing of his works in his lifetime. His 1616 collection, called the *Workes*, was overseen by the author, who had made many revisions in the texts before submitting them to the printers. For this reason Jonson's texts can be seen much more as literary works than can Shakespeare’s, simply because the latter took no interest in the printed versions of the plays. It can be useful to think of Jonson as primarily a literary writer and Shakespeare as primarily a theatrical practitioner.
The Renaissance and ‘early modern’ periods

Shakespeare and Jonson lived and worked during the period that has retrospectively come to be known as the ‘Renaissance’. The Renaissance in England most often refers to the years between 1485, the establishment of the Tudor dynasty under Henry VII, and 1660, the end of the Civil War and the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II. Bookended by Henry VII and Charles II, the period also encapsulates the reigns of the monarchs Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I, as well as the period of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. For the purposes of this syllabus, however, you will concentrate on the years 1590–1614, the years during which Shakespeare and Jonson produced the plays on our syllabus. These years fall under the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, and are known as the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods respectively.

You should be aware that, in English literary studies, the term ‘Renaissance’ is interchangeable with the term ‘early modern’. We might refer to Shakespeare and Jonson as ‘early-modern’ dramatists. This phrase is preferable to the more loaded term ‘Renaissance’, which is most often associated with fourteenth-century Italian art history that connotes an incomparable ‘re-birth’ in the arts. ‘Early modern’ avoids these kind of value judgements, and is especially useful to us as it suggests a degree of continuity between many of the social and cultural developments that took place in this period and the present day: developments such as the rise of the middle classes, the move towards urban living, an awareness of the importance of individuality, the emergence of a capitalist economy instead of a feudal system, the rise in literacy and innovations in education. In early-modern drama, therefore, we can see evidence of emerging ideas and principles that still have currency today.

Early-modern studies have developed into an area of some critical complexity. Among the many issues critics have focused upon are the political aspects of early-modern drama, the representation of gender in performance, and the construction of individual identity. These ideas, and many more, are all relevant to a study of early-modern comedy. Details of critical texts that adopt these kinds of approaches can be found in the bibliography.

Learning outcomes

Having read this chapter, in conjunction with your own study, you should be able to:

• decide which editions of the plays you will buy
• outline the biographical facts of both Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s lives
• compare Jonson’s and Shakespeare’s approaches to playwriting
• set Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s plays against their historical context
• define the terms ‘Renaissance’ and ‘early-modern’ and explain why these plays are considered to fall into these categories.
Chapter 2: Defining comedy

Recommended reading


Introduction

The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose Poetics constitutes the first comprehensive analysis of literary aesthetics in Western culture, had a very simple definition of comedy. For him, anything could be defined as comic as long as it was not clearly tragic. In practice, this meant that a ‘comedy’ could be any kind of text or performance that did not end with death, destruction or suffering. It is interesting to note in Aristotle’s definition that humour or joking does not have to be a quality of the text in order for it to be comic.

In the English literary tradition, it is the early-modern period that introduces the idea of humour and joking to comedy as an essential part of the form. Comedies were extremely popular on the Renaissance stage, outnumbering both tragedies and history plays combined by about three to one. However, it would be fair to say that comedy has received much less critical attention, certainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, than either history or tragedy, and we may be forgiven for believing comedy was a minor form. This is certainly not the case, and the introduction of joking may go some way to explaining the relative lack of scholarly interest in comedy, as it does not conform to the standards of high moral seriousness that have interested and informed English literary criticism for much of the past century.

Activity

What is it about the nature of comedy that means it is often considered the poor relation of other dramatic forms? Consider the reasons why humour does not seem to translate itself across the centuries as well as something like tragedy.

Comedy has traditionally been seen to stand in opposition to tragedy, sharing many of its themes and dealing with similar issues but finding different solutions to the conflicts it narrates. For example, in tragedy, human weaknesses are seen as dangers, which have the potential to subvert the order of the state, whereas in comedy, human weaknesses are seen as foibles that can be changed and all conflicts can be reconciled. A tragedy often ends with multiple deaths, whereas a comedy will end with multiple marriages. In these examples, the
opposition between tragedy and comedy appears to work, but it is useful to think of comedy as an independent form that has a very different agenda to that of its tragic counterpart.

One of the problems with constructing a definite model of early-modern comedy is that the form itself was not entirely settled. Comedies often came into being through a combination of a number of different dramatic forms. This is especially true of Shakespeare. English Renaissance comedy, then, is a kind of assemblage of folk performances like the ‘wooing’ play, or the ‘combat’ play, combined with the improvised clowning of the fools and mummers and the verbal punning of the public-school dramatists who took their inspiration from ancient Roman writers like Terence and Plautus.

Activity
Consider the structure of the plays on this syllabus. Can you see examples of any other types or styles of performance operating within them?

To begin to formulate a definition of early-modern comedy, we might begin by trying to establish how it understands the world. Comedy seems to feature a very distinctive idea of humanity, one that can be fearsomely cruel and savagely indignant, but also able to forgive and to allow the possibility of change. Comedy dramatises interpersonal relationships that are generally more forgiving than those of tragedy. The population of comedy is more evenly distributed among men and women. Locations tend to be humbler, and the stakes much lower than in tragedy.

Also, it could be said that comedy is writing about the body. Bodily excess or deficit can both be sites for humour, whether it be Ursula the pig woman of Bartholomew Fair, the hypocritical abstinence of Malvolio, or Cesario, the boy who lacks a penis in Twelfth Night, the body itself seems to make us laugh. This is clearly seen in the continual popularity of types of slapstick humour that produce laughter by virtue of the uncontrollability of the bodies they depict. Clowns create physical chaos in the name of humour, simply because they are showing us ways of using our bodies that we have long since been told not to copy. This excess or deficit of the body is often clearest at the level of performance, but many comic themes also seem to focus on our bodily needs, bodily desires or even bodily wastes. The themes of comedy are essentially about what we want, whether it be gold for our pockets or a partner to love, and this is the primary fuel for its humour, as it is in the pursuit of those things we want most that we reveal ourselves to be most foolish.

Activity
What do the characters of Shakespearean and Jonsonian comedy want? What are their prime motivations?
Clowns and comedians

The clowns and comedians of the early-modern stage were extremely popular and important members of their theatrical companies. Clowns like Robert Wilson, Richard Tarlton and Will Kemp enjoyed a particular kind of celebrity status during their careers. By the time of his death in 1588, Richard Tarlton had acquired an almost legendary reputation due to his ability to make an audience laugh simply by sticking his head out of the Tiring House (the upstage area where actors both changed and made their entrances). Will Kemp is known for his *Nine Day’s Wonder*, a text that commemorates the occasion on which he danced all the way from London to Norwich. The particular skill of Tarlton, Wilson and Kemp was their talent for improvisation. Their performances would combine songs, dances and jigs, and musicianship, along with slapstick and verbal humour. Clowns could be exasperating for the other actors, as their popularity and improvisational skill meant that they would often take more stage time with their extemporised routines than they should have done. Just as the genre of Renaissance comedy incorporates a variety of older comic forms, so the performers responsible for producing laughter were experts in a whole series of theatrical skills.

Pastoral comedy and city comedy

The comedies that you will study for this subject fall into two rough categories: pastoral, or festive comedy, and city, or citizen comedy. Shakespearean comedy is predominantly pastoral, although there are exceptions, whereas Jonson is primarily an exponent of the city comedy form.

Of the two types of comedy, pastoral comedy is the form that we associate most with the folkloric assemblage of types outlined above. City comedy, on the other hand, borrows many of its plot forms and characters from the Roman ‘New Comedy’ of Terence, among others. As you will see, both have very different comic identities.

For this subject, the most unambiguously pastoral comedies are Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Twelfth Night*, although *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* contain pastoral elements. Pastoral comedy is interested in the themes of love, romance and forgiveness. Its principal characters tend to be young and belong to the educated minor aristocracy, whereas its locations tend to be well-kept courts or houses or rural settings like the Forest of Arden or the wood outside Athens. Pastoral comedy is interested in marriage intrigues and the passage of true love. Consider, for example, Portia’s marriage test in *The Merchant of Venice*, or the fiery courtship of Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. As is often the case with all Shakespearean drama, the central narrative movement of pastoral comedy revolves around the idea of removing societal conflict and replacing it with harmonious relationships.

City comedy, as its name suggests, finds its settings in the major cities of Europe, most often London. The difference between an aristocratic or rural setting and an urban one has a real effect on the tone of the
comedy, which tends to be interested in revealing venality and vice. The relationship between vice and the city is clearly seen in Jonson’s prologue to *The Alchemist*:

Our Scene is London, ’cause we would make knowne,
No countries mirth is better then our owne.
No clime breeds better matter, for your whore,
Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more,
Whose manners, now call’d humours, feed the stage:
And which have still beene subject, for the rage
Or spleene of comick-writers. (Prologue, 5–11).

Here, Jonson explicitly outlines the types of person he feels London breeds: prostitutes, pimps, con-men and braggarts. City comedy is also populated with characters known as ‘cozeners’ or ‘cony-catchers’, confidence tricksters who ‘gull’ their unsuspecting victims out of their money. In the Jonsonian city, everyone is out for themselves, and no human relationship seems to be able to stand outside an economic relationship. The city is a dog-eat-dog world, in which everyone is continually in pursuit of acquisitions, and everything is commodified.

**Activity**

Find some examples of ‘gulling’ and ‘cozening’ in Jonson’s city comedy. What does this tell you about the character’s attitude towards their victims, and their view of humanity in general?

Jonson also makes reference to the ‘humours’, a theory of physiognomy that informed his characterisations. The humours were the four bodily fluids that were considered to be essential to the constitution of a human being. These were: blood, phlegm, choler and melancholy, and are the source of the word ‘humour’ that we now take to mean merriment or jocularity. According to the theory, if one’s humours were in a state of balance with one another, then one would have a pleasant and well-adjusted disposition. If, however, one of the humours should take precedent over any other, then the afflicted person would become defined by the dominant fluid. Hence, if one has a predominance of choler, you would become bilious: that is, disagreeable and cantankerous. If, however, you suffered from a preponderance of blood, you would become sanguine and therefore brave, hopeful and amorous. When introduced into comedy, the theory of the humours serves as a means of providing stock or stereotypical characters of the kind found in the Italian *Commedia Dell’arte*, or even in many of the TV sitcoms of recent years. These characters are driven entirely by one sole motivating characteristic that defines them over all others. To look at the dramatic personae of *Volpone*, for example, is to see the comedy of humours in action. Each character is named after an animal, and as such, the behaviour of each one is determined by the distinctive attributes of that animal.

What follows is a table that offers a quick guide to the principal differences between pastoral and city comedy. Please be sensitive to the fact that this table is schematic, and therefore not all categories or differences will apply to every play on this syllabus.
### Differences between pastoral and city comedy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Pastoral</th>
<th>City</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>Court/country</td>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Greed</td>
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<td><strong>Class</strong></td>
<td>Aristocratic</td>
<td>Bourgeois</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome</strong></td>
<td>Marriage/reconciliation</td>
<td>Unmasking/shaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>World View</strong></td>
<td>Optimism/rebirth</td>
<td>Pessimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral</strong></td>
<td>Celebrates vitality</td>
<td>Condemns vice</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Form</strong></td>
<td>Folkloric</td>
<td>Greco-Roman</td>
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### Reading comedy

There are several different aspects to comedy of which you should make yourself aware. Comedy does not work in a uniform way, but rather it uses several different strategies in order to produce its humorous effects. Four of the most widely used techniques you will discover are satire, farce, parody and dramatic irony.

**Satire** works by presenting a character whose personality invites the audience to laugh at them. This requires a key lack of self-awareness on the part of the character, who may be overly proud, pompous, or hypocritical. In order for satire of this kind to work, there has to be a sense of perceptual distance between the character’s view of themselves and our view of them.

**Farce** aims to produce a loud burst of laughter rather than simply raise a smile. It tends to involve fast-paced scenes that are predominantly about exaggerated physical action rather than sophisticated verbal wit. Farcical scenes might involve slapstick humour, a series of rapid entrances and exits, absurd misrecognitions, violent confrontations, or a sudden reversal of fortune.

**Parody** is a comic technique that feeds from the voices of other people. It copies or emulates the pattern of another’s speech, or the style of another’s writing, and mutates it, usually through exaggeration, in order to achieve a humorous effect. An example of parody from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* would be the play of ‘Pyramis and Thisbe’ produced by the mechanicals, in which Shakespeare parodies another form of Elizabethan drama, the tragic interlude.

**Dramatic irony** involves the staging of situations so that they cause a series of repercussions not intended by those on stage. Jonson makes full use of dramatic irony, especially when developing plots that depend upon the idea of confidence tricks or gulling. Dramatic irony of this kind works along the principle of the possession and withholding of information among characters in order to produce situations in which there are people on-stage who do not know what is going to happen, whereas members of the audience already do.

### Activity

Look for examples of these four types of comic action in the plays on this syllabus. Can you think of any other types of comic action not listed here?
Learning outcomes

Having read this chapter, in conjunction with your own study, you should be able to:

• give Aristotle’s definition of comedy
• discuss English Renaissance comedy and how it developed
• give examples of characteristics of English Renaissance comedy
• compare and contrast pastoral and city comedy
• define and give examples from the plays you are studying of satire, farce, parody and dramatic irony.
Chapter 3: The context of the plays

Recommended reading


The rise of the theatres

Prior to the sixteenth century, no purpose-built theatres existed in England. The period of Shakespeare and Jonson witnessed remarkable developments for English drama, in terms of writing, staging, and the organisation and professionalisation of the theatrical companies.

The most successful theatres of the day were located in the London borough of Southwark, in Bankside, on the south bank of the Thames, an area known for the variety of seditious and morally suspect entertainment on offer there. Theatres such as the Globe, Shakespeare’s theatre, built in 1599, and the Rose, built in 1587, plied their trade in the neighbourhood alongside brothels, inns and bear-baiting pits, where customers paid to see a bear fight with dogs. Given the raucous and unseemly nature of the Bankside area, it seems unlikely that going to a play was quite the rarefied and genteel pursuit it is today. Given the type of person frequenting the area, and the types of entertainment they were after, the early-modern theatre must have been a very exciting, lively and combative place, just in order to attract an audience.
The playhouses of Bankside were located in Southwark due to the hostility theatrical performances attracted from the City of London authorities who held jurisdiction of the financial district of London on the north side of the river. The City of London was largely under Puritan control, and as such, public theatrical performances were forbidden within the confines of the City walls. Puritans were a particularly strict, sober and disapproving sect of Protestants who believed strongly in hard work and avoiding all temptations into sin. As such, they are often considered to be the antithesis to the flamboyant and artistic players, who had been considered no better than vagabonds until only recently. The tension between Puritans and theatre practitioners often manifests itself in the plays, with Puritan characters often becoming the targets of harsh satire in comedy.

Activity
Try and find some examples of Puritan characters. How are they represented, and what does their treatment tell us about dramatists’ attitudes towards them?

Early-modern stages and staging

The Swan Theatre, London. Sketch by Johannes De Witt, as copied by Arend van Buchell.
This drawing shows the layout of the Swan Theatre, as it was seen by a sixteenth-century Swiss tourist to London. Although we cannot be entirely sure how accurate a representation it is, scholarly research and archaeological findings suggest that the De Witt sketch is probably typical of the kind of early-modern stages that would have been found on Bankside. The Elizabethan public playhouses were not designed completely from scratch, but rather represent a bringing together of the assorted types of playing space that actors would have been used to performing in before they had permanent homes. As a result, the wooden-board stage that thrusts into the audience, called a ‘thrust’ or ‘pinaxore’ stage, is a direct descendent of the temporary booth stages that would be erected for one-off performances by touring companies. Similarly, the tiring house, the structure at the back of the stage where the actors would change and make their entrances and exits, sports two doors that mimic those of the great halls of the country houses of the aristocracy, who regularly invited players into their homes at times of celebration. The seating galleries that line the outer perimeter of the auditorium are themselves reminiscent of the galleries that lined the walls of the courtyards of coaching inns, another popular venue for one-off performances.

The arrangement of the theatre has repercussions for the perception of any play performed there. Rather than facing out into an auditorium that looks at it straight on, the early-modern stage was surrounded by galleries and standing spaces on three sides. This meant that the audience were offered a multiplicity of viewpoints on the stage at any one time, and a spectator in one of the galleries would get a perspective of the stage-action which would be very different from the perspective from another gallery. Immediately in front of the stage at ground level is a space for audience members to stand, known as the ‘pit’, which offers another perspective again.

Most stages built in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries use a design known as the ‘proscenium arch’, an arch at the front of the stage that frames the action almost as a border frames a postcard. It can be argued that there is an enormous difference between the dramatic experience one has viewing the Elizabethan thrust stage and the ‘proscenium arch’ stage, because the latter offers only a single perspective on the drama. Similarly, modern auditoriums require audience members to sit still and silently in the dark. With no artificial lighting available, and performances taking place in the afternoon, to often highly vocal crowds, the whole perception of attending the playhouse, and indeed what kind of cultural artefact a play might be, are different from the present day.

Some of the effects of the stage layout can be easily shown. The common occurrence of a line such as ‘Here comes my Lord of Norfolk, looking like a great big85’ is due to the great distance between the doors at the back of the stage where a character would enter, and the position at the front of the stage where they would be about to join a group. Such lines of dialogue fill the time during which the actor must make his way towards the others. Similarly, the absence of any means of showing where action takes place, as the early-modern stage used little or no scenery, and certainly not ‘realistically’ painted backdrops,
gives rise to the frequent practice of the opening lines of a scene containing dialogue emphatically telling the audience where the scene takes place.

**Activity**
Staging is important for a study of comedy, due to the amount of quick movement, changes and entrances and exits required. Pick one or two scenes from Shakespeare and Jonson and think about how you might perform them on an early-modern stage.

**The audience**
It is impossible to reconstruct the exact social composition of the people who attended performances at the public playhouses, but the relatively low cost of entry, and the many references throughout the canon of Renaissance drama to the ‘groundlings’, lower-class denizens of the pit, and the existence of more comfortable galleried seats and ‘lord’s rooms’, all suggest that a wide cross-section of society may well have been in attendance. Given that the design of the theatre allowed for the occupancy of those with different levels of income and comfort needs, it seems likely that people of all social strata would have watched a play together. This is also reflected in the tone and structure of many Renaissance plays, which continually mix action with coarse and bawdy humour and sexual language, with beautiful rhetorical speeches and allusions to classical authors and gods. It has to be understood that the world of Renaissance drama was also a world of highly competitive business, and so it was imperative to maximise the appeal of drama, and not to alienate any members of the audience, in order to maintain profits.

**Activity**
Read the induction to Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*. What does it tell you about perceptions of authors, audiences and playgoing in the early-modern period?

**Patronage and censorship**
As previously mentioned, the City of London authorities were extremely hostile to drama. However, the court and courtiers supported it because they wanted to see plays performed in their houses, and their patronage of companies meant that they could have a troupe of players at their command whenever they wanted to entertain a guest or improve their standing at court with some magnificent display of hospitality. As a result, a great deal of tension existed between the City, the players and their patrons. The City was effectively run by the Lord Mayor and the Aldermen, who were elected by business interests. By way of countermeasure, the court exercised control of the players both through the patronage system and by enforced censorship of plays, as a means of calming the fears of those in the City who wanted drama very strictly and directly policed. It could be argued, therefore, that the theatres were something of a pawn in the struggles between the Court and the City.
Puritan businessmen found the theatres worrying for several reasons. One was that theatre involved many citizens gathering together at one place, which might give rise to problems in public order. Another was the ‘immoral teaching’ or subversive ideas that plays might contain. Yet the greatest fear was probably reserved for the fact that acting involved transgressions and disruptions of both gender and class, where men dressed up as women and commoners dressed as kings and queens. When it occurred off-stage, any challenge to the class system was considered to be extremely dangerous. Indeed, such transgressions were expressively forbidden by law anywhere except on the stage. Another objection frequently voiced was that the large congregations of people were aiding the spread of plague. This last objection, true as it was, also became a useful ‘cover’ for measures of social control that were really taken for other reasons.

Activity
What kinds of ‘transgression’ may be said to be dramatised in the plays? Try and find examples that may have been considered dangerous or outrageous by the Puritan authorities.

The censoring of plays was the responsibility of the Master of the Revels, who came under the authority of the Lord Chamberlain. A theatrical company would present the proposed script for a play, called the ‘Book’, to the Master of the Revels, who would either give an unconditional licence, a conditional licence or no licence at all. The first was complete approval for the play to go ahead without alterations. The second was an approval subject to certain alterations, such as the excision of particular lines, which the Master of the Revels would mark in the book. The last was a complete refusal, which generally meant that the project would have to be completely abandoned; this would only happen if the theatrical company had very badly misjudged the acceptability of the work they had commissioned from the dramatist.

The single most significant piece of state censorship was the Act of Parliament of 1606 entitled ‘Acte to restraine Abuses of Players’. This act outlawed the use of the name of God in oaths in plays (e.g. ‘By Christ I’ll do it!’) and affected not only new plays but revivals of old ones. This law is the reason that there is much greater use of pagan gods’ names in oaths (e.g. ‘By Jove’, ‘By Jupiter’) in plays written after 1606. If you wish to trace the influence of censorship on the plays of the period you will find Janet Clare’s Art Made Tongue-tied by Authority and Richard Dutton’s Mastering the Revels useful.

Personal satire against identifiable famous persons was just the kind of material a theatrical company could expect to have censored by the Master of the Revels. In 1601 the Privy Council warned the players at the Curtain theatre not to ‘represent upon the stage… gentlemen of good desert and quality that are yet alive under obscure manner’ as they had been known to do.

Activity
A complaint was made that Eastward Ho! satirised King James, and the dramatists were sent to jail for it. Try to find the offending material and judge how offensive it might be.
If the Master of the Revels missed it, the friends of the person satirised could be expected to complain about the play and have the offending production stopped until the offence was removed. Similarly, anything that appeared to engage with contemporary political issues would be potentially dangerous. One possible way to avoid the accusation of political subversion was to set the play in another country. The only plays Shakespeare sets in England are his English history plays; all the others, with the single exception of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, are set overseas. Jonson, by contrast, sets most of his plays in London. One of the questions you should be able to approach by the end of this subject is an analysis of the degree to which setting serves to deflect accusations of subversion.

**Learning outcomes**

Having read this chapter, in conjunction with your own study, you should be able to:

- describe the relationship between playwrights and Puritans in the sixteenth century
- explain the concerns Puritans had about plays
- sketch a diagram of a typical early-modern theatre
- describe the origins of different aspects of these theatres, such as the ‘thrust’ stage
- compare the early-modern to the proscenium arch stage and explain how each would have affected the staging of plays
- describe the system of patronage that operated in Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s time
- explain the role of the Master of the Revels.
Chapter 4: Contextualising extracts

Recommended reading


Introduction

Section A of the examination asks you to place a specific passage in the context of the play from which it derives and to comment on its use of language, themes, dramatic interaction and its specific relation to the play as a whole. Contextualising extracts requires you to be able to read a selected passage very closely, paying particular attention to the language of the piece, its tropes, metaphors and other rhetorical devices, and how the language reflects broader aspects of the play as a whole. Contextualising extracts is also known as ‘close reading’, a practice that, as its name suggests, requires detailed scrutiny of the words on the page before you introduce any of the other material you may choose to use.

Suggested approach

The first thing you must do when contextualising extracts is locate the passage within the play it belongs. Once you have done this, apply yourself closely to the language of the piece and make note of the kind of ideas it uses, the manner in which it expresses those ideas, and the general tone of the passage. After you have dealt with these issues, you can consider how they relate to the themes of the play as a whole.

It is vital to remember that contextualising extracts is not simply about describing the scene or speech you are given, or about providing a synopsis of the play. Rather, it is about close analysis of language and discussion of how it operates in relation to the play as a whole.

Read the following passage from the beginning of *Volpone* and think about how you might write an account of it in relation to its context. Remember to think of the piece as an exercise working outwards from the close reading of specific words and phrases to bigger thematic concepts, dramatic interaction and even the social and historical context of the play.

*VOLPONE*

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.
Hail the world’s soul, and mine! more glad than is
The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun,
Peep through the horns of the celestial ram,
Am I, to view thy splendour darkening his;
Show’st like a flame by night, or like the day
Struck out of chaos, when all darkness fled
Unto the centre. O thou son of Sol,
But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,
With adoration, thee, and every relic
Of sacred treasure in this blessEd room.
Well did wise poets, by thy glorious name,
Title that age which they would have the best;
Thou being the best of things, and far transcending
All style of joy, in children, parents, friends,
Or any other waking dream on earth.
Thy looks when they to Venus did ascribe,
They should have given her twenty thousand Cupids;
Such are thy beauties and our loves! Dear saint,
Riches, dumb god, that givest all men tongues,
That canst do naught, and yet mak’st men do all things;
The price of souls; even hell, with thee to boot,
Is made worth heaven. Thou art virtue, fame,
Honour and all things else. Who can get thee,
He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise

Is this passage in blank verse or in prose?

The most important place to begin an analysis of the passage is with an assessment of its form and any linguistic and rhetorical devices that are being used. You must always begin an exercise in close reading by identifying the form of the passage. In early-modern drama, the extracts provided will always be in blank verse, known as iambic pentameter, which has 10 syllables in every line; or prose, ordinary nonmetrical speech that is not subordinate to syllabic rhythm. As a general rule of thumb, you should be aware that blank verse predominates in early-modern drama, whereas prose is usually reserved for lower-class characters and lewd comedians. As such, the use of either verse or prose tells us something of the status and tone of the characters and themes portrayed.

Similarly, you should be able to identify the common literary and rhetorical devices that are at work in the passage. Familiarise yourself with terms such as:

- metaphor
- simile
- hyperbole
- bathos
- litotes
- personification.

Be ready to comment on them as they appear. Also, it will be very useful to have some sense of the importance of allusion in early-modern drama. Both Shakespeare and Jonson refer continually to the gods, myths and heroes of ancient Greece and Rome as well as other
Legends from folklore. Of course, although you will not be expected to be an expert in this field, it will be helpful to have some sense of where and why they use classical references. You will find a reference work such as Chris Baldick's *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* extremely useful.

**Activity**

Look at the passage and, with reference to the rhetorical terms listed above, see which ones are being used, and what their effect is.

Having analysed and dealt with the rhetorical language of the passage, you may now move on to a discussion of how it relates to the broader themes of the play. This passage begins with Volpone greeting his gold. Volpone's attitude towards his wealth is clearly delineated in the opening lines of the passage, describing the room as a 'shrine', the gold as his 'saint' and the gold as both the soul of the world and himself. From these early indications, it is easy to see how this covetous language informs the rest of the play, obsessed as it is with personal pecuniary gain and the unhealthy centrality of money to each character's idea of their own identity and ethics.

**Activity**

By using words such as 'shrine', 'saint' and 'soul', what ideas have money replaced in Volpone's imagination?

The question of ethics is central to the city comedy form, most notably their absence, distortion or disregard for selfish purposes. Jonson's comedy is characterised by its satirical and vehement insistence that the early-modern world he observed was populated by a mass of people motivated entirely by their own self-interest to the almost total detriment of human relationships, sentiment or religious principles. *Volpone* is a play in which characters appear to have little spirituality. Shakespearean comedy has its woods and villas to convey a sense of benign supernatural forces at work to restore harmony to society. Jonson's comedy, on the other hand, seems to be expressing an almost total absence of the divine in the lives of the people he dramatises.

**Activity**

What is the status of religion in Volpone's Venice? Is there any sense of it being an issue at all? How might the setting of the play reflect an absence of religion?

This idea is treated further in the line 'Hail the world’s soul, and mine!', emphasising that the Venice of *Volpone* will be a location driven entirely by monetary gain and further consolidated in the exaggerated action of Volpone kissing his treasure. It is clear that Volpone has transformed his inanimate money into a fetish, almost literally, as shown by the use of the word 'idol'. In later scenes of the play, we can see that a similar transformation, or reversal, of attitudes towards people and things clearly takes place. Money and possessions are given the attributes of people and are desired as an ardent lover may desire the object of their affections, whereas human beings are treated as commodities to be bought and sold, especially women. Treating
people as objects is known as ‘reification’ and is a recurring theme in city comedy. City comedies like *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* make great use of the humour to be had from the actions of avaricious characters and the ease with which they will abandon their professions, beliefs and families at the slightest indication of riches. When Volpone talks of money transcending all joys, especially personal relationships (‘children, parents, friends’), he is merely describing a state of mind that seems to be shared by the majority of characters in the play.

In this respect, Volpone’s language in this passage can clearly be seen to foreshadow the confusion and perversion of orthodox values that is central to the satirical force of the play.

**Activity**

Have a look at the inter-personal relationships of the play in the light of Volpone’s praise of his gold. Are there any relationships in the play that are not entirely governed, or subservient to, financial considerations?

It seems that a relationship with wealth has not only replaced familial relationships, but is also the sole motivation for any kind of social intercourse. The line, ‘Riches, the dumb god, that givest all men tongues’, suggests the very motivation of all the action in the play. Volpone here intimates to the audience that the promise of his inheritance is going to be the only thing that will induce people to talk to each other.

To conclude, think of the close reading and contextualising of extracts as a process that works from the specific details of language in order to understand the larger themes of the play. Familiarise yourself with the particular nuances of style in Shakespeare and Jonson and take time to learn something about rhetorical and poetical devices and forms. Close reading is a very important and useful tool in literary criticism and if you read with sensitivity, you will have no difficulty developing this technique.

**Learning outcomes**

Having read the section on contextualising extracts, in conjunction with your own study, you should be able to:

- define rhetorical terms and identify them in a given passage
- identify and comment upon the style of the passage, and analyse the type of language used
- describe the relationship between specific examples of text and the text as a whole
- employ a close-reading approach without being synoptical or simply describing the action that the passage represents.
Chapter 5: Single text analysis: Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

**Recommended reading**


**Introduction**

Section B of the examination asks you to write a critical essay on a single text from the curriculum. The following chapter serves as an example of the kind of analysis you may be expected to produce.

*As You Like It* is part of the tradition of Shakespearean comedy that consists of roughly 13 plays. This chapter invites you to consider a number of key areas central to an understanding of the play. It is by no means exhaustive, but intends to offer you some background and insight into some of the themes and issues that constitute the play. Read the text closely and think about it in relation to the ideas discussed below, but also try and locate some of those ideas in other Shakespearean comedies you have read. Not all of the principles will apply but you will find that with some modification, there is a great deal of thematic similarity across the genre.

**Pastoral**

*As You Like It* is best described as a ‘pastoral’ comedy, given its population of lovers, shepherds, swains and fools. Pastoral is a form that enjoyed some popularity in the Elizabethan period, yet it can be traced back as far as ancient Greece and the poet Theocrites, who mixed country-dwellers with mythological figures in order to explore the sorrows of love and the harsh realities of life. Pastoral is more or less exclusively identified with rural locations and rustic motifs. Yet its
view of the countryside is by no means realistic. Shakespeare's Forest of Arden is a benign arboretum that provides fully for its inhabitants, and provides little threat or discomfort besides the occasional marauding off-stage lion or snake. The view of the countryside expressed in the pastoral tradition is one that is both idyllic and nostalgic. Nostalgic insomuch as, by the 1590s, increased urbanisation had seen many people economically uprooted from their traditional rural homes and transplanted into the ever-swelling cities. As a result, for the crowded audience packed in at the Globe Theatre, the countryside stood as a kind of natural antidote to all the problems of city living. Duke Senior's praise for the exile's life is typical of the pastoral tradition:

*Are not these woods*
More free from peril than the envious court?
Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,
The seasons' difference, as the icy fang
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
Which when it bites and blows upon my body
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say
'This is no flattery; these are counsellors
That feelingly persuade me what I am?*
Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finding tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

(2.1.3–17)

**Activity**

How has Duke Senior made a comparison between the court and the countryside? Is the countryside considered in its own terms, or as an extension of court?

**A pastoral critique**

Shakespeare is a highly sensitive and self-conscious writer familiar with many different literary styles. Despite the apparent simplicity of pastoral, it is essentially a highly artificial form, drawing as it does on literary conventions that were nearly 2,000 years old by the sixteenth century. Therefore, even though it may sound contradictory, the 'simple life' of pastoral is an extremely artificial representation of rural life. Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare is not content for *As You Like It* to simply conform to pastoral conventions without passing some kind of knowing comment on the contrivance and artifice of those conventions. The play features several examples of characters who either unconsciously parody or directly dismiss the pastoral form. Consider, for example, this exchange between Corin and Touchstone:
CORIN: Those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behaviour of the country is most mockable at the court. You told me you salute not at the court but you kiss your hands; that courtesy would be uncleanly if courtiers were shepherds.

TOUCHSTONE: Instance, briefly; come instance.

CORIN: Why, we are still handling our ewes, and their fells you know are greasy.

(3.2.38–48)

This conversation has the effect of puncturing some of the idyllic nature of pastoral by drawing our attention to some of the more unpleasant aspects of being a shepherd. This type of comic levelling of pretension is known as bathos, and this is also the comic mode employed by the melancholy Jaques, whose consistently bad-tempered contributions to the proceedings have the effect of presenting a balanced counterpoint to the otherwise straightforward presentation of pastoral that the play might otherwise become.

Activity
Jaques is the only courtier who opts to remain in the Forest at the end of the play. Why might this be?

Festivity
In addition to the pastoral setting, Shakespearean comedies are often associated with festivity: that is, pre-ordained days of the year set aside for holiday and celebration. Indeed, solstitial festivity is reflected in the titles of two of the comedies on this course: Twelfth Night and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Seasonal holiday plays still exist in the form of pantomimes, but during the early-modern period, dramatic performances had even closer ties to certain calendric events. This is a tradition that Renaissance theatre practitioners inherited from the Mystery cycles of the late-Medieval period, a series of devotional plays that were performed in conjunction with the religious calendar. Festivals could often be unruly and regularly provoked outrage from puritanical quarters of society, as a sermon preached in St Paul’s Cathedral in 1578 clearly shows:

There be not many places where the word is preached besides the Lord’s day... yet even that day the better part of it is horribly prophaned by devilish inventions, as with Lords of Misrule, Morris dancers, Maygames, insomuch that in some places they shame not in the time of divine service, to... dance about the Church, and without to have men dancing naked in nets, which is most filthy.¹

This quotation demonstrates both the horror that festive behaviour instilled in Puritans, but also the extent to which outrageous and normally inconceivable behaviour was permitted for a short period of time. Holidays allowed a degree of collapse in the social hierarchy and the temporary inversion of societal norms. We might like to think of this as a period of ‘licensed transgression’, a mode of behaviour

whose unacceptability is made acceptable purely because it is limited and predicated upon the notion that normal social hierarchies will be reinstated as soon as it is over. Perhaps these holidays worked as a kind of release valve in early-modern society, a built-in discharge of social pressures and antagonisms in the course of a year that allowed the established social order to run smoothly at all other times.

As You Like It’s relationship to festivity is in some ways clear just from the very tone of the text. The Forest of Arden is alive with celebrations of summertime and nature’s fertility, and with wrestling matches, forest banquets, dressing up, songs, a masque, love poetry and May games. In keeping with the idea of holiday, work is notably absent. As this exchange shows, time does not exert its tyranny as it does in the town:

ROSALIND: I pray you, what is’t a clock?

ORLANDO: You should ask me what time o’day: there’s no clock in the forest.

(3.2.290–291)

The absence of time’s burden is significant, because it means that the day is measured in terms of leisure rather than profitability or statecraft. All financial and business enterprise is rendered redundant in the Forest, as rather than selling labour in order to make money to live, the Forest itself provides an abundance of munificent bounty for all those who live within it.

Think about the activities of the characters in the Forest. How do they live? Who works, and who hunts? Is there any sense of social class distinctions in the Forest?

Just as the spirit of festivity marinades the play, so does the idea of licensed transgression. Rosalind’s cross-dressed transformation into Ganymede is the most obvious example of this. That a woman may pass herself off as a man represents a clear breaching of the delineated orthodoxies of gender distinctions as they were understood in the Renaissance world. However, Rosalind’s cross-dressing is always pragmatic and never perverse. It serves as a means to protect herself from the wrath of Duke Frederick. Just as the days of Misrule must inevitably end, the generic formula of Shakespearean comedy demands that Rosalind will once again become a woman as soon as social injustice has been addressed.

Green Worlds

Where pastoral and festivity come together is in the idea of the ‘Green World’ This term works as an extremely useful means with which to understand both the geography and narrative movement of Shakespearean comedy. A Green World is a location to which characters presented with problems retire to escape their dilemma. Without any conscious act of will on the part of the characters, the Green World provides answers to their predicaments, enabling them to return, restored, to their initial point of departure. The Forest of Arden is one such location, as are the woods outside Athens that allow the young lovers of A Midsummer Night’s Dream to be together, the Illyrian forest in Twelfth Night, and Portia’s Belmont in The Merchant of Venice. The
Green World is a quasi-magical place of healing and reconciliation that induces transformations in all who enter it. Just as a good holiday has a restorative influence upon us, so entry into the Green World confers the ability to right the wrongs that start the play. However, the Green World is always a temporary home, dwelt in only long enough to re-adjust a sense of priority before returning to one’s proper place in society.

As You Like It begins with the banishments from court of Orlando and Rosalind, commanded by the despotic Duke Frederick. Frederick, who has already usurped his brother Duke Senior, acts as what is known as a ‘blocking agent’: that is, a character whose actions breed discord within the social interactions of the play. The exile from court initiates the retreat into the Green World of Arden. From this point in the play, much of the action is either explicitly or implicitly dedicated to finding a solution to Frederick’s injustice and the removal of blockages that disrupt social harmony.

**Activity**

As You Like It features familial relationships in discord. Whose are harmonious, whose disruptive?

The Green World is a wish-fulfilment location, an imaginary Shangri-La in which apparently irredeemable situations are resolved. It also provides space for the exploration of desires and the indulgence of senses that are not perhaps catered for at court, such as cross-dressing and the ambiguous sexual tension of Orlando and Ganymede’s wooing scene in Act 3, Scene 2. The ideas of country and city stand in opposition to one another: the city is a place of politics and deceit, whereas the country is one of love and leisure. In the resolution of Shakespearean comedy, however, the two ideas are brought together in a whole series of images of union. The wholesome ideals and restorative power of the Green World are brought into the court/city, and political harmony is restored, which is in turn underlined by the image of personal harmony and fulfilment implied by marriage.

**Activity**

List the types of transformation characters undergo when in contact with the Green World.

**Love**

As You Like It is packed with lovers and love interest, as you might expect from a play in the pastoral mode. But As You Like It does more than simply show us couples happily in love. It offers us an insight into the complexities of love and the often inexplicable or unpredictable nature of desire. The central couple dramatise the conventions of courtship and wooing, but this is not without satire. Orlando represents the classic Petrarchan lover, a lover schooled in the tradition of the fourteenth-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarca, whose verse was the blueprint on which almost all Renaissance love poetry was subsequently based. Orlando’s poems are examples of bad Petrarchanism being lampooned by Shakespeare:

> From the east to the western Ind,
No jewel is like Rosalind.
Her worth being mounted on the wind
Through all the world bears Rosalind.
All the pictures fairest lined
Are but black to Rosalind.
Let no face be kept in mind
But the fair of Rosalind.
(3.2.83–91)

The laborious repetition of the rhyme, and the conventionality of the similes show that Orlando is trying hard, but not particularly succeeding, to be a Petrarchan lover.

Activity
In Act 3, Scene 2, Rosalind, dressed as Ganymede, but pretending to be Rosalind, tries to educate Orlando in the folly of such conventional love. Have a look at this scene and think about the ways in which Rosalind tries to puncture Orlando’s romantic fantasies and replace them with a more realistic view of men and women.

Two other sets of lovers stand in contrast to our central pair: Silvinius and Phoebe, and Touchstone and Audrey. As often happens in Shakespearean comedy, the words or actions of secondary characters act as contrasts or juxtapositions to those in the foreground. Act 3, Scene 5 sees an extended parody of the conventionalised wooing of Orlando. Silvinius and Phoebe play out a kind of rustic parody of the Petrarchanism so skilfully challenged by Rosalind. Silvinius complains of loving more intensely than any other who has ever lived, whereas Phoebe, obsessed with Ganymede, reacts to him in the manner of the haughtiest of Petrarchan mistresses. Touchstone and Audrey (who has no idea what the word ‘poetical’ means) represent what we might call the comic underside of Petrarchan love – a straightforward passion based on physicality and bawdiness.

Activity
What is the overriding view of love as it is presented in this play? Is it a poetic or pragmatic concept?

These three versions of love come together to form an overall critique of romantic relationships. If you consider also the cross-dressing elements, and the same-sex ambiguities of the pairings Ganymede/Orlando, Phoebe/Rosalind and Rosalind/Celia, we can see how Shakespeare’s play in its fantastical setting seeks to question the boundaries that conventional society places on human desire.

Activity
Are the changes and relative freedoms afforded by the Forest rendered invalid by the conventional marriages and return to court that conclude the play?

Some critics have suggested that the play is overtly homoerotic, imagining a harmonious all-male community in the forest that is then intensified with the love-play of Orlando and Ganymede. Certainly
the name ‘Ganymede’ is loaded with homosexual implications, as Ganymede was the young male lover of Zeus, and was the term used during the early-modern period to describe the young male lover of an older man. This sexualised reading of the play is complicated further by Rosalind’s epilogue, when the actor playing her flirtatiously addresses the audience and admits he is a boy, yet:

If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of
you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that
liked me, and breaths that I defied not.
(5.4.211)

Activity

Despite the fact that Rosalind is the fullest female role in Shakespearean drama, is it possible to see As You Like It as a play that excludes women, or only permits them as long as they are honorary men?

Learning outcomes

Having read As You Like It and some of the recommended secondary reading on the play, you should be able to:

• consider the use of conventions of pastoral and the comedy in relation to the play
• discuss the idea of festivity, ‘Green Worlds’ and comic transformations
• read specific extracts of the text closely, and discuss how the language and imagery used relate to the play’s broader themes
• consider the representation of love and sexual desire in As You Like It in relation to early-modern ideas of gender distinctions.

Sample examination questions on As You Like It

1. ‘There’s no clock in the forest.’ Examine the relationship of work and leisure in the forest of Arden. How might they contribute to an understanding of the play as a pastoral comedy?
2. ‘Women are only permitted to speak while wearing trousers.’ What are the implications of Rosalind’s cross-dressed disguise for an analysis of gender distinctions in As You Like It?
3. Consider the various sets of lovers in As You Like It. What varying aspects or attitudes to love might they represent?
4. In what sense can As You Like It be described as a ‘festive’ comedy?

Suggestions for further study

Section B of the examination asks you to analyse a single play. But if you wanted to use As You Like It for a Section C question, there are a number of ways in which your study of the play may be broadened. For example, you may like to consider the play alongside other Shakespearean pastorals such as Twelfth Night or A Midsummer Night’s Dream, looking specifically at points of comparison or departure in the treatment of elements like cross-dressed women and young lovers. Alternatively, you might look at the difference in tone of As You Like It, and a darker, more
thematically challenging play such as *The Merchant of Venice*. How might you read the ‘Green World’ element of Portia’s Belmont alongside what seems to be an ostensibly racist narrative? How does the ‘Green World’ operate in this context? Is it still a force for healing, reconciliation and social harmony?

Alternatively, compare Shakespearean comedy with its urban Jacobean counterpart, represented in the work of Ben Jonson. Clearly Jonson is the more overtly venomous and satirical of the two playwrights, but his characters also undergo a process of transformation and change through the medium of comedy. How might you interpret these transformations? Are they the same as Shakespeare’s, or do they take the characters in a different direction altogether?

Finally, it is a good idea to begin to introduce an understanding of the social and historical background to the texts you read. How might your understanding of *As You Like It* be transformed if you placed it within the historical context of its first performance? By learning more about the role of women in the early-modern period, the concept of festivity and puritanical opposition to it, Petrarchanism, and ideas of social order and good government, you may find that, far from being simply an entertaining romp, *As You Like It* might be read as a deeply astute and politicised comment on certain aspects of sixteenth-century culture. It is highly recommended that you acquaint yourself with a variety of background material and a number of different perspectives in order to develop your own critical ability.
Chapter 6: Comparative analysis

Recommended reading


Introduction

Section C of the examination asks you to produce a critical analysis of themes in two or more plays, including at least one by Jonson, and one by Shakespeare. What follows is an example of the type of ideas that you may like to consider.

Comic transformation in The Taming of the Shrew, The Merchant of Venice and The Alchemist

Transformation

One of the main themes of early-modern comedy is the idea of transformation. Transformation can take many forms, but, essentially, comedy dramatises some type of change, whether intentional or otherwise, in the characters of the play. Change is in the spirit of social inversion or the transposition of people and places that is central to the comic world of the early-modern period. Transformations can include women dressing as men, Puritans becoming love-sick, or servants cheating their masters. This chapter will attempt to illustrate the themes of comic transformation through a critical comparison of Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew, and The Merchant of Venice and Ben Jonson's The Alchemist. It should be used as an example of how you may construct an argument following a single idea through a number of plays.

The Taming of the Shrew

Half-way through The Taming of the Shrew, Petruchio reappears to claim Katherina as his wife. Before he enters, Biondello describes his bizarre appearance:
BIONDELLO

Why, Petruchio is coming in a new hat and
an old jerkin; a pair of old breeches thrice turned; a pair
of boots that have been candle-cases, one buckled,
another laced; an old rusty sword taken out of the town
armoury, with a broken hilt, and shapeless; with two
broken points; his horse hipped, with an old moth-y
saddle and stirrups of no kindred; besides, possessed
with the glanders and like to mose in the chine, trob-
led with the lampass, infected with the fashions, full of
windgalls, sped with spavins, rayed with the yellows,
past cure of the fives, stark spoiled with the stagers,
begnawn with the bots, weighed in the back and
shoulder-shotten, near-legged before, and with a half-
checked bit and a headstall of sheep’s leather which,
being restrained to keep him from stumbling, hath been
often burst, and now repaired with knots; one girth six
times pieced, and a woman’s crupper of velour, which
hath two letters for her name fairly set down in studs,
and here and there pieced with pack-thread.

(3.2.43–61)

Petruchio, dressed in ill-fitting, improper and torn clothes, and riding
on a horse with a dislocated hip and other equine maladies, paints a
picture of disorder that is entirely inappropriate for a man supposed
to be courting his love. Transformation in dress is an often-used comic
strategy for Shakespeare, and here it works to visibly underline the
otherwise invisible transformations that permeate the play. Petruchio
seems to have so badly judged the situation that his failure must be
assured. However, Petruchio’s appropriation of an appearance and
behaviour that stands in absolute opposition to that expected of him
at this time is typical of the ideas of inversion and transformation that
constitute this play. The Taming of the Shrew is principally concerned
with Katherina’s change from ‘shrewd ill-favoured wife’ (1.2.59) to
someone so agreeably well-suited to marriage that her own father
admits that ‘she is changed, as she had never been’ (5.2.115). Therefore
Petruchio’s change in outward appearance acts as a counterpoint to
the inward change that Katherina will undergo.

This concept of change also begins the play. Petruchio’s strange dress,
suiting a man in extreme poverty rather than one in comfortable
circumstances, is a literal inversion of the situation of Christopher Sly,
the itinerant beggar whose sleep offers the Lord and Hostess with
the opportunity to dress him in rich apparel and present him with a
play. The framing narrative of Christopher Sly and the conveniently
strolling Players is the first occasion of a person becoming what they
are not in order to initiate some kind of change. Sly’s instantaneous
conversion from beggar to lord of the manor is the initial action that
sets the thematic tone, establishing the idea of a theatrical type of
'playing' and the shifting and appropriation of different identities. In many respects, *The Taming of the Shrew* is obsessed with theatricality and its transformative effects. But this idea is not confined to Sly, Petruchio and Katherina alone. The suitors of the sweet-natured Bianca themselves appropriate a role as they attempt to woo her with highly arched and conventionalised poetic language that masks their truly competitive identities and sexual motivations.

**Activity**

Given the theme of change in the play, attempt to chart all the various changes and transformations that constitute the action of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Although some critics have had trouble with the apparently total subservience of Katherina's final speech, what it clearly shows is the absolute transformation that she has undergone. Even though Katherina insists that a husband should be 'thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, Thy head, thy sovereign' (5.2.146–7), it is clear by this stage that her relationship with Petruchio is strongly established on affectionate grounds and the excited anticipation of their future lives together. Although her final speech to the assembled characters may seem merely a propaganda piece on behalf of husbandly superiority, it simultaneously outlines the place of acting in a relationship, appropriating roles and humours, and reacting to one another as the occasion demands.

**The Merchant of Venice**

Unlike *The Taming of the Shrew*, the transformations of *The Merchant of Venice* are not entirely happy ones, although they are understood to operate in the name of social harmony. The central conflict in this play revolves around Shylock's insistence on the literal interpretation of his bond and his planned fatal cruelty to Antonio. *The Merchant of Venice* seems to have established an apparently hopeless situation for the poor Antonio. But whereas *The Taming of the Shrew* uses comic inversion in order to bring about resolution, *The Merchant of Venice* establishes a series of antagonistic oppositions that must be resolved before harmony can be restored. These oppositions are drawn along the lines of Shylock's ethnic and religious difference to the Christian Venetians. Shylock's Jewishness aligns him with a certain sense of outdated barbarism in the eyes of the Christians. Shylock believes in Old Testament justice, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth': that is, a belief in exacting revenge and retribution in proportion to the crime. Venice, however, believes in the New Testament philosophy of 'turning the other cheek' and the idea of Christian mercy, as outlined by Portia when she says:

**PORTIA**

The quality of mercy is not strained.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.  
The mightiest in the mightiest. It becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptered sway.
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.
(4.1.181–194)

For Portia, mercy is considered to be an attribute of divinity, and one that any truly just monarch should have inscribed on his heart. In the court scene, the apparently irreconcilable factions of Antonio and Shylock confront each other directly. What is required is some kind of change in order to bring this deadlock to conclusion. The transformation that this situation produces is brought about by insisting on Shylock's conversion to Christianity, ironically as part of his punishment. Antonio outlines the details:

ANTONIO
That for this favour
He presently become a Christian;
The other, that he do record a gift
Here in the court of all he dies possessed
Unto his son, Lorenzo, and his daughter.
(4.1.383–387)

Shylock's sentence, as agreed by the court, insists on his transformation from Jew to Christian. This is not the sole transformation involved in the resolution of the dispute, however, as it also includes the redistribution of his wealth, half to the court, and half in deed to his 'son' Lorenzo. Lorenzo, of course, is no son of Shylock's, although he has eloped with his daughter Jessica and as such is an unwanted son-in-law. The marriage of Lorenzo and Jessica is a further transformation inasmuch as Judaism is a matrilineal religion, meaning that the faith is passed down through the generations by the mother rather than the father. By marrying Jessica, and converting her to Christianity, the Venetians have succeeded in preventing the creation of any more Shylocks in generations to come.

Activity
Given the conclusion of The Merchant of Venice, is it possible to think of Shylock as a sympathetic character?

What we can see in The Merchant of Venice is a principle of Shakespearean comedy that operates in nearly all of the comedies in this subject. Essentially, Shakespearean comedy can be said to dramatise the move from heterogeneity to homogeneity. Put simply, Shakespearean comedy likes to make everything fit together neatly, and will exercise the power of transformation on those elements that
do not, until they do. In *The Merchant of Venice*, this transformation has unpleasant racial undertones, as it insists on the religious homogeneity of Venice. A look at Shylock’s various verbal attacks on the Christian merchants shows how he himself continually remarks on his difference from them. It is this difference that must be eradicated.

**Activity**

Try and find examples of Shylock’s difference to the Christian Venetians. How do they describe his difference, and how does he understand it himself?

The agent of transformation in *The Merchant of Venice* is, of course, Portia. Portia not only solves the legal issues, but she also cross-dresses as the male attorney Balthasar, and is responsible for resolving the romantic interests at the end of the play. Portia is associated with all that is considered valuable by Venetian society. Shylock is a mean usurer, an occupation forbidden to Christians, who plies his trade on the Rialto bridge, a location that associates him with intransience and rootlessness. Portia, on the other hand, lives in the fine villa of Belmont, with its associations of landed aristocracy, and, therefore, heritage, stability, hospitality and moral orderliness.

**Activity**

Portia is associated with Belmont, marriage, cross-dressing and merciful justice. In what sense might she be described as a typically ‘comic’ character?

*The Alchemist*

In contrast to the Shakespearean demand for absorption into sameness, Ben Jonson’s city comedies often make a virtue of their character’s incompatibility with the orthodox moralities that surround them. Whereas Shakespearean comedy celebrates harmonious conclusions through marriages and reconciliations, Jonson tends to conclude his plays on a note of greater moral ambiguity, serving to merely highlight the greed and stupidity of his characters, rather than attempting to cure it. Indeed, it might be argued that a comedy like *The Alchemist* ridicules the idea of transformation.

To begin with, *The Alchemist* is centred around the non-existence of the philosopher’s stone, believed to be in the possession of Doll, Face and Subtle. Traditionally, a philosopher’s stone was a mythical mineral charged with the ability to transmute base metals into gold. As such, the idea of transformation is at the very heart of this play. However, the philosopher’s stone is mythical, and Doll, Face and Subtle are confidence tricksters, so we might modify the previous statement to suggest that the idea of fraudulent transformation is at the centre of this play.

*The Alchemist* is driven forward by a series of knocks at the door. Each knock ushers in a new client, which in turn necessitates a costume change and the adoption of a new persona by Subtle, Face and Doll. Even the names of the tricksters gesture towards the idea of unfixed identities and the possibility of change. The alchemical fraudsters have realised that in order to con their victims more efficiently, they must appropriate an identity that seems to offer access to whatever it is their
clients most desire. Transformation for Subtle, Face and Doll is about becoming desirable.

Activity
What is the role of desire in Jonsonian city comedy? How is it different to the concept of desire that exists in Shakespearean pastoral?

Just as the philosopher’s stone promises to transform, and the tricksters rapidly change their identities, so each of their clients is obsessed with the idea of transformation. Dapper wishes to become a raffish gambler and rakish lover, Sir Epicure Mammon wishes to spread his munificence about the world while indulging his senses to the extreme, whereas Kastril wishes to change the fortunes of his family by marrying his sister to a rich man. The comic premise of transformation here serves to highlight the ignorance and insensitivities of the characters whose desires are essentially selfish and self-serving. Jonson’s comic talent is revealed when we see the result of the interaction of the selfish desire for change with the continually transmuting conmen. Transformation does occur, but it is not the transformation the characters seek so much as the one they deserve.

For example, the Anabaptist clerics, Ananias and Tribulation, seek to establish their version of religious truth as the uniform religion of the world for the benefit of all humanity. A change of this kind, apparently in the name of spirituality, is soon transformed into a much nastier type of temporal concern:

SUBTLE

Or changing
His parcel gilt, to massy gold. You cannot
But raise you friends. Withal, to be of power
To pay an army, in the field, to buy
The King of France, out of his realms; or Spain,
Out of his Indies: What can you not do,
Against lords spiritual, or temporal,
That shall oppone you?

TRIBULATION

Verily, ’tis true.
We may be temporal lords ourselves, I take it.

(3.2.44–53)

In this example, the Jonsonian irony of transformation concerns the Puritan pastor’s unholy interest in conquering the world and dispatching all his enemies, which is a far cry from his stated wish to convert all to his pacifist faith.

Activity
In what ways might the philosopher’s stone be taken as a metaphor for the foolish characters that Jonson dramatises in *The Alchemist*?

Transformation, then, can be seen to be a primary function of comedic narrative in the early-modern period. Whether it be the removal of
blocking agents that prevent the passage of social harmony, or the transformation of fools into the personification of their own vice, early-modern comedy identifies with the power of change.

**Learning outcomes**

Having read this sample chapter, alongside your own independent study, you should be able to:

- identify a theme that runs through more than one text and analyse it accordingly
- see the differences and similarities in the treatment of a theme across more than one text
- find examples from the texts, and passages to support it, that illustrate your arguments
- combine close-reading skills with an ability to understand the formal structure of the texts you have chosen.

**Sample examination questions for Section C**

1. ‘While comedy aims to make us laugh, its true intention is to make us see the injustice in society.’ Discuss this opinion with reference to two or more plays, including at least one by Jonson, and one by Shakespeare.

2. ‘For all its competitive and individualistic energy, city comedy preaches essentially family values.’ Discuss with reference to two or more plays, including at least one by Jonson and one by Shakespeare.

3. ‘While comedy is a celebration of fertility and pleasure, it concludes with a message that is fundamentally conservative in tone.’ Discuss with reference to two or more plays, including at least one by Jonson, and one by Shakespeare.

4. ‘Although comedy allows women to speak, they are essentially commodities in a market run by men.’ Discuss this comment with reference to two or more plays, including at least one by Jonson, and one by Shakespeare.

5. In what ways can the action, characters or narrative of comedy be said to be ‘transgressive’? Discuss with reference to two or more plays, including at least one by Jonson and one by Shakespeare.

**Suggestions for further study**

The comparative analysis of themes and issues in Renaissance comedy is a broad and engaging field. There are many angles of approach it is possible to take, each of which will enable you to fashion a full and detailed answer. Perhaps you may like to think about gender issues in Renaissance comedy, the treatment of women and the expectations of men? Or, for example, you might consider the role of clowns and their relationship to the central narrative of the plays. Similarly, issues of mortality, such as black humour and *memento mori* (remembrances of death) are popular issues in early-modern comedy. What, for example,
is the relationship of comedy to death, or the threat or fear of death? You may also consider the political aspect of comedy, debating whether or not it is possible for comic narratives to uphold serious political agendas, or whether satirical anger is necessarily diluted by its humorous context. Consult the list of topics for study set out in the introduction to this subject guide for further ideas.
Appendix 1: Examination paper 2010

Time allowed: three hours

Answer THREE questions, ONE from EACH SECTION (all three questions carry equal marks). Do NOT present substantially the same material in any two answers, whether on this paper or in any other parts of your examination.

Section A

1. Place ONE of the following passages in the context of the play from which it derives. Comment on the themes, the use of language, and, where appropriate, the dramatic interaction.

a)
OLIVIA  Give me leave, beseech you. I did send
After the last enchantment you did here,
A ring in chase of you. So did I abuse
Myself, my servant, and, I fear me, you.
Under your hard construction must I sit,
To force that on you in a shameful cunning
Which you knew none of yours. What might you think?
Have you not set mine honour at the stake,
And baited it with all th’unmuzzled thoughts
That tyrannous heart can think? To one of your receiving
Enough is shown; a cypress, not a bosom,
Hides my heart: so, let me here you speak.
VIOLA  I pity you.
OLIVIA  That’s a degree to love.
VIOLA  No, not a grise; for, ‘tis a vulgar proof
That very oft we pity enemies.
OLIVIA  Why then, methinks ‘tis time to smile again.
O world, how apt the poor are to be proud!
If one should be a prey, how much the better
To fall before the lion than the wolf!

[clock strikes]
The clock upbraids me with the waste of time.
Be not afraid, good youth; I will not have you —
And yet when wit and youth is come to harvest,
Your wife is like to reap a proper man.
There lies your way, due west.
VIOLA  Then westward ho!
Grace and good disposition attend your ladyship!
You'll nothing, madam, to my lord by me?
OLIVIA  Stay!
I prithee tell me what thou think'st of me.
VIOLA  That you do think you are not what you are.
OLIVIA  If I think so, I think the same of you.
VIOLA  Then think you right: I am not what I am.
OLIVIA  I would you were as I would have you be.
VIOLA  Would it be better, madam, than I am?
I wish it might, for now I am your fool.
OLIVIA  [Aside] O what a deal of scorn looks beautiful
In the contempt and anger of his lip!
A murd'rous guilt shows not itself more soon,
Than love that would seem hid. Love's night is noon.
Cesario, by the roses of the spring,
By maidhood, honour, truth, and everything,
I love thee so that, maugre all thy pride,
Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide.
Do not extort thy reasons from this clause,
For that I woo, thou therefore hast no cause;
But rather reason thus with reason fetter:
Love sought is good, but giv'n unsought is better.

b)
BAPTISTA  Is't possible you will away to-night?
PETRUCHIO  I must away to-day before night come.
Make it no wonder; if you knew my business,
You would entreat me rather go than stay.
And, honest company, I thank you all,
That have beheld me give away myself
To this most patient, sweet, and virtuous wife.
Dine with the father, drink a health to me,
For I must hence, and farewell to you all.
TRANIO  Let us entreat you stay till after dinner.
PETRUCHIO  It may not be.
GREMIO  Let me entreat you.
PETRUCHIO  It cannot be.
KATHERINA  Let me entreat you.
PETRUCHIO  I am content.
KATHERINA  Are you content to stay?
PETRUCHIO  I am content you shall entreat me stay —
But yet not stay, entreat me how you can.
KATHERINA Now, if you love me, stay.
PETRUCHIO Grumio, my horse.
GRUMIO Ay, sir, they be ready — the oats have eaten the horses.
KATHERINA Nay, then,
Do what thou canst, I will not go to-day,
Nor to-morrow, till I please myself.
The door is open, sir, there lies your way,
You may be jogging while your boots are green;
For me, I'll not be gone, till I please myself.
'Tis like you'll prove a jolly, surly groom
That take it on you at the first so roundly.
PETRUCHIO O, Kate, content thee, prithee, be not angry.
KATHERINA I will be angry — what hast thou to do?
Father, be quiet — he shall stay my leisure.
GREMIO Ay, marry, sir, now it begins to work.
KATHERINA Gentlemen, forward to the bridal dinner.
I see a woman may be made a fool,
If she had not a spirit to resist.

c)
LEATHERHEAD What do you lack, gentlemen? What is’t you buy?
Rattles, drums, babies —
BUSY Peace, with thy apocraphal wares, thou profane publican — thy bells, thy dragons, and thy Toby’s dogs. Thy hobby-horse is an idol, a very idol, a fierce and rank idol; and thou the Nebuchadnezzar, the proud Nebuchadnezzar of the Fair, that sett’st it up, for children to fall down to and worship.
LEATHERHEAD Cry you mercy, sir, will you buy a fiddle to fill up your noise?
[Enter Littlewit, Win]
LITTLEWIT Look, Win; do look o’ God’s name, and save your longing. Here be fine sights.
PURECRAFT Ay, child, so you hate ‘em, as our brother Zeal does, you may look on ‘em.
LEATHERHEAD Or what do you say to a drum, sir?
BUSY It is the broken belly of the Beast, and thy bellows there are his lungs, and these pipes are his throat, those feathers are of his tail, and thy rattles the gnashing of his teeth.
TRASH And what’s my gingerbread, I pray you?
BUSY The provender that pricks him up. Hence with thy basket of popery, thy nest of images, and whole legend of ginger-work.
LEATHERHEAD Sir, if you be not quiet the quicklier, I’ll ha’ you clapped
fairly by the heels, for disturbing the Fair.
BUSY The sin of the Fair provokes me, I cannot be silent.
PURECRAFT Good brother Zeal!
LEATHERHEAD Sir, I'll make you silent, believe it.
LITTLEWIT I'd give you a shilling you could, i' faith, friend.
LEATHERHEAD Sir, give me your shilling; I'll give you my shop if I do not, and I'll leave it in pawn with you, i' the mean time.
LITTLEWIT A match, i' faith' but do it quickly, then.

[Exit Leatherhead]
BUSY [He speaks to the widow] Hinder me not, woman. I was moved in spirit, to be here, this day, in this Fair, this wicked and foul Fair — and fitter may it be called a foul than a Fair — to protest against the abuses of it, the foul abuses of it, in regard of the afflicted saints, that are troubled, very much troubled, exceedingly troubled, with the opening of the merchandise of Babylon again, and the peeping of popery upon the stalls here, here in the high places. See you not Goldylocks, the purple strumpet, there? In her yellow gown, and green sleeves? The profane pipes, the tinkling timbrels? A shop of relics!
LITTLEWIT Pray you, forebear, I am put in trust with 'em.
BUSY And this idolatrous grove of images, this flasket of idols! Which I will pull down — [Overthrows the gingerbread]
TRASH O my ware, my ware, God bless it.
BUSY — in my zeal, and glory to be thus exercised.

[LEATHERHEAD enters with officers]
LEATHERHEAD Here he is. Pray you lay hold on his zeal; we cannot sell a whistle, for him, in tune. Stop his noise first!

d)
KITLEY Do you see that fellow, brother Downright?
DOWNRIGHT Aye, what of him?
KITLEY He is a jewel, brother.
I took him of a child, up, at my door,
And christened him, gave him mine own name, Thomas;
Since bred him at the Hospital; where proving
A toward imp, I called him home, and taught him
So much, as I have made him my cashier,
And given him, who had none, a surname, Cash;
And find him in his place so full of faith
That I durst trust my life into his hands.
DOWNRIGHT So would not I in any bastard's, brother —
As it is like he is — although I knew
Myself his father. But you said y'had somewhat
To tell me, gentle brother: what is't? What is't?
KITELY Faith, I am very loath to utter it,
As fearing, it may hurt your patience:
But that I know your judgement is of strength,
Against the nearness of affection
DOWNRIGHT What need this circumstance? Pray you be direct.
KITELY I will not say how much I do ascribe
Unto your friendship; nor, in what regard
I hold your love; but, let my past behaviour,
And usage of your sister, but confirm
How well I’ve been affected to your —
DOWNRIGHT You are too tedious, come to the matter, the matter.
KITELY Then, without further ceremony, thus.
My brother Wellbred, sir, I know not how,
Of late is much declined in what he was,
And greatly altered in his disposition.
When he came first to lodge here in my house,
Ne’er trust me if I were not proud of him:
Methought he bare himself in such a fashion,
So full of man, and sweetness in his carriage,
And (what was chief) it showed not borrowed in him,
But all he did became him as his own,
And seemed as perfect, proper, and possessed
As breath with life, or colour with the blood.
But now, his course is so irregular,
So loose, affected, and deprived of grace,
And he himself withal so far fall’n off
From that first place, as scarce no note remains,
To tell men’s judgements where he lately stood.
He’s grown a stranger to all due respect,
Forgetful of his friends, and not content
To stale himself in all societies,
He makes my home here common as a mart,
A theatre, a public receptacle
For giddy humour, and diseased riot.

[Enter Morose and Dauphine]
MOROSE O my cursed angel, that instructed me to this fate!
DAUPHINE Why, sir?
MOROSE That I should be seduced by so foolish a devil as a barber will make!
DAUPHINE I would I had been worthy, sir, to have partaken your counsel; you should never have trusted it to such a minister.

MOROSE Would I could redeem it with the loss of an eye, nephew, a hand, or any other member.

DAUPHINE Marry, God forbid, sir, that you should geld yourself to anger your wife.

MOROSE So it would rid me of her! And that I did supererogatory penance, in a belfry, at Westminster Hall, ’t the cockpit, at the fall of a stag, the Tower Wharf — what place is there else? — London Bridge, Paris Garden, Billingsgate, when the noises are at their height and loudest. Nay, I would sit out a play that were nothing but fights at sea, drum, trumpet, and target!

DAUPHINE I hope there shall be no such need, sir. Take patience, good uncle. This is but a day, and ’tis well worn too now.

MOROSE O, ’twill be so forever, nephew, I foresee it, forever. Strife and tumult are the dowry that comes with a wife.

TRUEWIT I told you so, sir, and you would not believe me.

MOROSE Alas, do not rub those wounds, Master Truewit, to blood again; ’twas my negligence. Add not affliction to affliction. I have perceived the effect of it, too late, in Madame Otter.

EPICOENE [Approaching Morose] How do you, sir?

MOROSE Did you ever hear a more unnecessary question? As if she did not see! Why, I do as you see, Empress, Empress.

EPICOENE You are not well, sir! You look very ill! Something has distempered you.

MOROSE O horrible, monstrous impertinencies! Would not one of these have served? Do you think, sir? Would not one of these have served?

TRUEWIT Yes, sir, but these are but notes of female kindness, sir; certain tokens that she has a voice, sir.

MOROSE O, is’t so? Come, an’t be no otherwise — what say you?

EPICOENE How do you feel yourself, sir?

MOROSE Again, that!

Section B

Answer ONE question.

2. Jack shall have Jill;
   Nought shall go ill.
   (A Midsummer Night’s Dream)
   How satisfying is the resolution supplied through marriage in Shakespeare’s comedy? Reference should be made to one play.

3. Consider the symbolic significance of one of the following in any one comedy you have studied for this unit: hunting; feasting; commerce.

4. ‘Jonson’s interest in gender is pervasive — and arguably pernicious, since it jeeringly affirms the stereotypical association between effeminacy and homoerotic desire, allowing misogyny and
homophobia to affirm and amplify each other in the usual ways’ (CHRIS BAILEY). Consider either Jonson’s or Shakespeare’s interest in gender in the light of this comment, with reference to one play.

5. ‘Shakespeare’s comedies reflect a kind of experimentation [...] testing the limits of genre’ (LOUISE GEORGE CLUBB). Discuss how far either Shakespeare or Jonson test the limits of genre, with reference to one play.

6. As he brews, so shall he drink. *(Every Man in His Humour)*
   How ‘fitting’ are the consequences of actions in any one comedy by either Shakespeare or Jonson?

7. Discuss the treatment of one or two of the following in one comedy you have studied for this unit: passing time; delay; varied pace.

**Section C**

Answer **ONE** question.

Your answer in this section must include detailed analysis of **AT LEAST ONE** play by Shakespeare and **AT LEAST ONE** play by Jonson.

8. Compare and contrast the two dramatists’ treatment of one of the following: quick wit; disguise; melancholy.

9. Discuss the effective deployment of variety (e.g., of character, incident, or language) by both dramatists.

10. ‘Self-exposure is [...] more comic than description’ (EDWARD PARTRIDGE). Discuss with reference to the comedies of Shakespeare and Jonson.

11. ‘The modern self is defined by its performances and its acquisitiveness’ (ROBERT N. WATSON). To what extent are Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s characters ‘modern’ according to this definition?

12. How far would you agree that Shakespeare and Jonson have different concepts of villainy?

13. Compare the means by which each dramatist creates and resolves tension.
Advice to candidates on how Examiners calculate marks

It is important that candidates recognise that in all papers, three questions should be answered in order to get the best possible mark (ensuring that the rubric for the paper has been followed accordingly).

Examiners follow a simple mathematical formula when awarding a final overall mark: they give each answer a mark out of 100 (up to three answers only, as required by the exam paper); they then total all available marks; and finally they divide the total by three, thus giving an average overall mark.

So, if your first answer is given 57%, your second answer is given 56%, and your third answer 50%, then the calculation will look like this:

\[
57 + 56 + 50 = 163 \\
163 ÷ 3 = 54.3
\]

Overall mark: 54%

Two good essays and no third essay will always bring the mark down. So, if in the example above a third answer was not given, the calculation would look like this:

\[
57 + 56 = 113 \\
113 ÷ 3 = 37.6
\]

Overall mark: 38%

In this case, even if the candidate had written a ‘poor’ third answer getting a mark of 40% their overall mark would be higher than not attempting an answer at all:

\[
57 + 56 + 40 = 153 \\
153 ÷ 3 = 51
\]

Overall mark: 51%

Note in the example above how the 40% mark, while low, still enables the candidate to achieve an overall mark in the Lower Second category, which is in keeping with their first two marks of 57% and 56%. Not answering a third question would see the candidate lose considerable marks and drop two whole classes. It could also mean the difference between a pass and a fail.

Candidates are thus strongly advised to give equal attention across the paper, plan their time accordingly, and attempt to provide three answers of roughly the same length and as full as possible. Candidates are also reminded that it is totally unnecessary to copy out the question again into the answer book; a question number in the margin is sufficient enough, and this will also save valuable minutes.
General remarks

The most popular questions were Section A: questions 1a and 1b; Section B: question 2; Section C: question 8.
This report will discuss in some detail all the questions attempted by candidates.

What the Examiners liked

This year there was an exceptionally high standard of work, with a good number of first class and 2:1 grades achieved, with very few fails. This is an encouraging trend and it is to be hoped that the standard will continue to improve as candidates take advantage of support mechanisms, such as Goldsmiths’ essay marking scheme and e-seminars.

What the Examiners found to criticise

Last year’s failings still persist so the advice given previously merits repeating. Some poor handwriting and confused expression was observed. Every minute counts in the examination so candidates really should avoid wasting time unnecessarily copying out the questions, or providing footnotes and references. Poor use of English and persistently poor spelling continue to reduce candidates’ marks. Candidates are urged to ensure that they write on three questions, to maximise their potential score. In Sections B and C, it is not a good idea to try to cover too many plays. In order to discuss the material adequately, no more than three plays at most should be treated in a single essay. Those who attempt to discuss more than three usually fail to develop a discussion to much effect, producing a mere ‘list’ of examples. This does not constitute an academic essay at this level. Candidates are once again encouraged to make full use of the essay marking scheme which provides feedback and advice on effective writing techniques.

What the Examiners would like to have seen

Performance in this section continues to improve overall, although too many candidates still lack the necessary skills with which to comment on the extracts effectively. Essay writing practice for this section is essential so, once more, candidates are urged to submit work under the essay marking scheme for formative feedback. Crudely listing basic elements, naming features and relating the plot will not achieve a good pass. Guidance is provided in the University’s guide, Responding to ‘Section A’ questions (2004).

Section A

Question 1
Passage a

This was one of the most popular passages chosen for commentary. Most candidates picked up on the sexual tension between Olivia and the disguised Viola, along with the ironies of the situation. Some
commented on Olivia’s style of speech as indicative of her self-dramatising and role-playing, as she expresses her passion using a high style and intense imagery (‘enchantment’, ‘tyrannous’, the wolf and its prey). The inequality between them is evident in the relative disposition of lines, as Viola awkwardly tries to say as little as possible and leave. Some remarked on the comedic effect of the stychomythia (lines 28–34). Unfortunately candidates made quite a few mistakes concerning form, for example many perceiving prose where there is none. Some good observations were made about the precise effects achieved, such as the overly smooth enjambment, the fanciful quality of the imagery suggestive of Olivia’s tendency to make-believe, the entangled paradoxes towards the end of her speech betraying either real excitement or a deluded intoxication with the idea of love.

Passage b
This was another very popular choice. Again, some candidates thought the passage contained prose whereas it is entirely in verse. Mistakes over the century in which the play was written, who the characters are, and whether or not the couple is already married, suggest too little familiarity with the play on the part of some candidates. Nevertheless many closely analytical answers delivered thorough commentaries. Many good points were made concerning the shrewd behaviour of Petruchio, such as the excessive Petrarchan politeness he exhibits while ironically acting in an utterly dismissive way towards Katherina. The dynamics of the passage were appreciated by quite a few people, who commented upon such features as the shared lines (lines 10–18); these provide a farcical exchange intensifying the humour, with the triple repetition of ‘entreat’ leading to the witty refutation by Petruchio even as he appears to capitulate. Katherina’s repeated assertion, ‘... till I please myself’, fits her character perfectly, but works to expose her wilfulness while anticipating the imminent frustrating of her will. The best candidates paid attention to all figures present – rather than simply focusing on the two main characters the impact of a crowd at the wedding feast was appreciated, making public the unfolding power struggle as well as influencing the behaviour of both Katherina and Petruchio.

Passage c
This was the most popular Jonson passage (taken from *Bartholomew Fair*). The best essays discussed the presentation of Busy as hypocritical critic of the fair. The opening exchange contrasts Busy’s blustering denunciation (itemising each object of his disparagement with lots of arm gestures and pointing finger movements implied by the repeated deictic ‘thyt’) with the brief, businesslike – if slightly mocking – offers of Leatherhead. As the passage progresses Busy becomes increasingly impassioned, and idiotic, using heavily emphatic alliteration (‘... the broken belly of the Beast’, ‘The profane pipes, the tinkling timbrels’) and extended oxymoron (‘foul Fair’). His antagonism, violence and continuous noise make him the main culprit as far as the unsavoury nature of the fair is concerned, so that the arrival of the officers to apprehend him makes a fitting resolution to the extract. As several candidates noted, the pace of the passage is appropriately quick, with
a series of rapid, sometimes overlapping, exchanges among a host of characters, creating a strongly realised sense of crowd and variety. The careful differentiation between characters is worth noticing, as Jonson provides individualising touches: Purecraft’s anxious (secretly resentful?) deference to ‘brother Zeal’, Littlewit’s peacemaking earnestness and readiness to collude, even Win’s silence (betokening pleasure, awe or dismay?). By paying attention to such specifics candidates deliver a thorough analysis which merits high marks. Simply offering general comments with hardly any detailed appraisal is the least successful strategy to employ, but many did just this.

**Passage d**

Only a few candidates chose this extract from *Every Man in His Humour* but those who did generally performed very well indeed. Occasionally there were problems with too little focus on specific features of the language and form. Some excellent responses discussed Kitely’s skilful manipulation of Downright, first deploying pathos to establish his ethical credentials (relating his charity and affection towards the ‘child’ he fostered), then feigned reluctance as he stretches out the delay for as long as possible, until ‘forced’ by Downright to describe the ‘altered disposition’ of Wellbred. Here he delivers a highly controlled account of the ‘decline’, using balanced phrases over 11 lines to praise hyperbolically (‘... perfect, proper and possessed... ’) before shifting at line 39 (‘But now’) to condemn extravagantly across a further 11 lines.

**Passage e**

Unfortunately most discussions of this passage from *Epicoene* were either too brief or too general. The passage clearly divides into two halves: the entrance of Morose and Dauphine as the former complains about his marriage; and the interaction with Truewit and Epicoene which exemplifies and exacerbates Morose’s grievance. The language is full of the specific place names and topical references usually favoured by Jonson, as well as a range of loaded terms charged with deep religious significance (‘cursed angel’, ‘devil’, ‘minister’, ‘penance’) creating a thread of imagery. The amusing series of questions from Epicoene exasperate Morose, demonstrating his own foolishness: it is extremely ironic and comedic that her three observations (lines 28–29) draw three rhetorical questions from him complaining of her excessive speech (lines 30–31).

### Section B

**Question 2**

This was by far the most popular choice of question in Section B. Most essays dealt with marriage in *As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The less successful essays did little more than retell the plot, forgetting to assess the ‘satisfactory’ resolution achieved by marriage. The better responses presented particular arguments (for example, considering how unorthodox Shakespeare’s treatment of marriage is; discussing the implausibility of many marriages as in *Twelfth Night*; contrasting
the two couples in *Much Ado about Nothing*). A good strategy is to appraise a range of representations of marriage, for instance, considering how and to what effect Shakespeare presents enormously contrasting couples in *As You Like It*. The most successful candidates analysed and commented upon the extremes and complications here with Touchstone, Silvius, Oliver and Orlando each experiencing very different unions, some much more ‘satisfactory’ than others. The dynamic in play deserves full consideration.

**Question 3**

In answering this question, most candidates chose to write on commerce. What candidates are warned against is attempting to write on all three topics; there simply is not enough time to do justice to all three and efforts to cover all topics resulted in poor, superficial pieces which often failed to gain a pass grade. The rubric emphasises that only ‘one’ topic is to be chosen, so technically, offering more than one constitutes a violation.

Commerce is a key aspect of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Volpone*, *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Alchemist*. The ‘symbolic significance’ needs to be kept in the foreground when considering any of these plays. Merely describing where and how commerce occurs will not gain good marks. The better essays took account of the function and deployment of commerce, for instance, in *The Merchant of Venice*, where both sides of the religious divide practise commerce but strong contrasts develop which expose prejudice and hypocrisy operating beneath the surface. The romantic aspirations of Bassanio are mingled from the opening of the play with pressing financial concerns, which some see as debasing his protestations of love. Jonson often presents commercial activities as symbolic of moral standing; hostility towards commerce is particularly prominent in *Bartholomew Fair*, while his other plays depict the gullibility of the greedy being exploited to reveal social dysfunction.

Feasting takes on a ritualistic, almost sacramental quality in *As You Like It*, contributing to the establishment of an alternative community in the Forest of Arden. In *Twelfth Night*, the excessive consumption of resources in Olivia’s household becomes a moral issue, setting appetite/desire against aesthetic self-denial. Hunting in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has many functions, including mirroring the chase of love (a common trope). Candidates produced some very fine essays on such topics.

**Question 5**

Unfortunately essays on this topic were generally disappointing as too often they failed to address the question specifically, tried to cover too many plays, and in some cases, neglected to consider genre, which is the central issue. *As You Like It* was a common choice of play here, providing a good example of the ‘mixed’ mode, combining high tragedy with comic resolution. *The Merchant of Venice* would have provided another very good example of such a strong contrast, mixing elements from very different genres. The experimental nature of Shakespearean and Jonsonian comedy can be explored with reference to just about any play. What matters is to be clear about certain generic
features, with a good awareness of essential attributes of comedy and tragedy, satire and burlesque. Conventions from *commedia dell'arte*, the comedy of humours, City comedy, and so on are followed and diverged from, with both playwrights often treating traditional matter in a complex manner. Main themes and characterisation should be considered alongside other features which contribute to generic complexity such as the role of the sub-plot, non-naturalistic aspects of performance and gender constraints operating at the time.

**Question 6**

Answers to this question covered a wide range of plays including *Every Man in His Humour*, *Volpone*, *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*. It is important here that candidates assess clearly the degree of appropriateness and satisfaction in dramatic terms. Are villains justly treated? In the case of figures such as Shylock and Malvolio, this may not be a straightforward matter. Are the foolish treated too leniently or too harshly? If ambiguities and tensions remain, then the consequences may be seen to be ill-fitting. The achievement of the dramatist should be considered not just at the end of the play, the usual place for final resolution, but also during the course of the drama. A good approach is to construct a clear argument, for example, presenting a selective appraisal of female figures whose experience leaves many questions unanswered, or whose fate seems troubling in some way, such as Hero, Jessica, Celia or Dol Common. Alternatively, an effective debate could be staged to take account of whether innocence is rewarded or subjected to excessive trial; whether intelligence is good or bad, according to the presentation of ‘clever’ characters (e.g. Mosca). Having a definite purpose or structure to the discussion tends to produce a far more successful essay than those which simply retell the plot.

**Question 7**

The topic of passing time was the only one chosen here and it was generally very well handled. There are various aspects of ‘time’ which might be discussed, such as the presence or absence of ‘real’ time (i.e. the Classical concept of Unity of Time), the manipulation of the audience’s perception of time, the varied presentation of certain scenes as lengthy and others as rapidly enacted, the effects of specific time ‘frames’ (e.g. the festive occasion of Twelfth Night, one midsummer’s night, an afternoon at the fair). Jonson’s use of time constraints is particularly interesting. Fruitful approaches to this question might consider the means by which he presents action which is both specific and imprecise, within and outside time; his masterful exploitation of pace, which is evident within individual scenes and speeches as well as overall; the comedic effects of the gathering pace of much of his semi-farcical material.
Section C

Question 8

This was the most popular choice in Section C, with over half of all candidates choosing to write on disguise. As disguise is one of the most common features of Shakespeare's and Jonson's comedies, there is no shortage of material available for consideration. What some essays overlooked, however, was the need to move beyond describing events and plot to construct an analytical or argumentative essay appraising both dramatists ‘treatment’ of disguise. It is essential to formulate an overall opinion as to how Shakespeare and Jonson compare in their use of disguise. Some possible questions to consider relate to gender: in these plays, what is the nature and function of cross-dressing? Is assuming the identity of a man liberating for female characters? Is it shown to be disruptive? Is identity itself revealed as an artificial construct? Are gender boundaries destabilised? How are moments of revelation rendered? It would also be useful to discuss other issues which may be at work, concerning class, religion and morality. Considering the topic from a particular perspective allows for a thorough response to the question. Those essays which adopted and argued for definite opinions fared much better than those which took a simplistic descriptive approach. Several outstanding essays considered Jonson's deployment of farcical excess, analysed how styles of speech change along with appearance, explored how lasting transformations are achieved by temporary disguise, and compared self-discovery with self-deception. Candidates need to be aware that setting out lists of examples is the least successful strategy for such ‘topic’ questions.

Question 9

This question requires a detailed account of how both dramatists present a wide range of characters, styles of speech and/or incident. The multiple disguises of The Alchemist would be a good topic to consider, as role-playing accumulates in an increasingly frenzied sequence. Comparing the contrasting ‘voices’ present in Twelfth Night would also be interesting, considering for example, Feste's world-weariness, Viola's romantic expression and Malvolio's self-righteousness. Effective use of contrasts and juxtapositions provide the essential dynamics of drama. All candidates are advised to study these features carefully.

Question 10

Few candidates wrote on the subject of self-exposure, despite its prevalence in many of the plays concerned. One obvious example is Malvolio, whose external image is shown to be drastically at odds with his internal attitudes. Jonson’s own Puritanical hypocrite, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, provides a clear comparison. Volpone is another prime candidate to consider, perhaps alongside some of Shakespeare's villains; similarly the actions of the hapless lovers in A Midsummer Night’s Dream revealing their shallowness and/or folly might be compared to the Collegiates, whose utterances betray their sordid souls. Having a strong comparison tends to be very helpful when
assessing comparative dramatic treatment. In this case, it is vital that candidates address the point about self-revelation being funnier than third-party accounts.

**Question 11**
The few responses to this question handled it well. The two main features to consider are performance and acquisitiveness, as defining aspects of ‘self’ in Watson’s terms. Individual self-consciousness in *The Merchant of Venice* can be seen to be enacted in Shylock’s revenge plan, Bassanio’s ‘quest’ to win Portia and Jessica’s elopement. Deliberate acts and desires define all these figures. Volpone also embodies the role-playing self-seeker, while Mosca too is a consummate actor, so both illustrate this type of ‘modern’ mentality. Viola and Epicoene, Beatrice and Titania would be interesting female figures to compare. In fact, the layering of ‘self’ is a widespread phenomenon in the comedies of both dramatists. There is a case to be made contesting the terms of the quotation or limiting its applicability to the plays in question. One might, for instance, argue that types and caricatures equally demonstrate ‘selfhood’ by other means.

**Question 12**
This was a very popular question, with excellent pieces on the Malcontent (e.g. Don John), the Outsider (e.g. Shylock), the theatricality of stereotypical villainy (Volpone) and how dupes and gulls are unwittingly manipulated into villainous acts (e.g. Claudio). Several good essays discussed such topics as the degree of villainy demonstrated, the attention given to the causes or origins of wickedness, how prejudice is exploited and how the audience is made complicit. Another fruitful line of enquiry could consider the punishments accorded to wrongdoers, as indicators of ‘just deserts’, demonstrating the playwrights’ attitudes towards different kinds of villainy. As long as candidates discussed the means by which villainy is represented, and constructed a clear comparison of the dramatists’ methods, their essays were generally successful. Those who merely listed examples of villainy tended to fare badly.

**Question 13**
Quite a few candidates chose this question. Again, structuring answers so as to compare the playwrights’ practices was a much better strategy than listing examples. Plays which were discussed included *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Alchemist*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Epicoene*, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Volpone*. Clearly this diverse material yields a great deal of variety in the tensions created and resolved, covering love rivalries, delusion, illusion, social, racial and religious disharmony, conflicting desires and competitive villainy. Some outstanding essays paid close attention to features such as the contrasting conventions of pastoral and city comedy, and detailed appraisal of specific dramatic techniques (the use of blocking agents, pace, discovery patterns and so on).