

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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The Themes in Shakespeare

## LOVE

(ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL; AS YOU LIKE IT; A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM;  
THE TAMING OF THE SHREW; CYMBELINE; OTHELLO; TROILUS AND CRESSIDA;  
ROMEO AND JULIET; LOVE'S LABOR'S LOST; SONNETS)

Shakespeare is a master student of the forms of love, and the velleities of that emotion are central to many of his plays. Love can kill, if not well managed (*Othello*; *Romeo and Juliet*), can charm, if given its own head (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *As you Like It*), or can perplex (*All's well that ends well*; *The Taming of the Shrew*) with its ironic capacity to modify what seems the fated course of life. In the Sonnets Shakespeare sees love as a portal to the ideal (and transient) perfection of beauty.

*All's Well that Ends Well* (1602) is a problem play, in the sense that it raises questions—what is true love? Is love at first sight reliable?—that emerge from the unfolding of the play itself. What leads Helena to fall headlong for Bertram when he has given her no encouragement? Why does he feel no native affection for her, and treat her badly, even after the King has sanctioned her marriage? Above all why does he fall heavily in love with her at the play's end, leaving us to feel that fake love (or imaginary love, or hollow love) has replaced the deep love Isabella has so long felt for him? Why has what seemed destined to turn out as a romance refused to round itself out in the soap opera direction? Were we to begin our analytical perusal of Shakespeare's work with *All's Well that Ends Well*, we would sense at once how tone-subtle the author is, who can refuse the pure romantic possibilities of a wrap up play like *Romeo and Juliet*?

*As you like it* (1599). From the outset of the play, we see the importance of love taking place 'at first sight,' as Christopher Marlowe put it. When Rosalind watches Orlando beat the highly favored Charles, in a wrestling match, she is totally captivated. Like Orlando, who also goes into banishment in the Forest of Arden, Rosalind can think of nothing but the handsome young man who won his match, nor he of anything but the lovely free spirited Rosalind, to whom he carves love poems on all the trees in the forest. Their love is as lightning strong as that of Helena for Bertram, in *All's Well that Ends Well*.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1594). From the outset, this play is concerned with weddings, marriages, the state of married couples (the King and Queen of the Fairies) and the realization that the course of true love does not flow smoothly. Even the King and Queen of the Fairies, who have been long married, appear to us enmeshed in fatuous quarrels. But the beauty of love, in a Shakespearean comedy, is that it can quickly restore imperfections in its own fabric, and remake itself whole again. There is an inner lightening in the love that illuminates many of the comedies of Shakespeare.

*The Taming of the Shrew* (1593). A different love story. What did Shakespeare think about 'domination' in this play? Obviously Petruchio finds domination the only way to control Katharina, and seems to enjoy it, or to get to like it, but what does Shakespeare feel about domination? This question is a theme in the play. Shakespeare would seem to enjoy making this question become thematic. This is a comedy meant to make you both laugh and think, which is one reason it appeals to thinking younger folks in our own time. Katharina ultimately allows herself to be submissive, though that is far from her natural condition. Does submission ultimately suit her? Is Shakespeare giving us to believe that submission is the path to happiness in marriage? It is striking, that Bianca, the good girl, the popular girl, of the two sisters, seems a far less promising marriage partner than Katharina.

*Cymbeline* (1609). The true lovers of the play are Imogen and Posthumus, but even their love is flawed. Posthumus is hopelessly enraged, at the whole human condition, when he is shown the letter from Iachimo, confirming his presence in the bedroom of Imogen. It is as though true love can melt on the slightest suspicion. Even though fate reunites the two lovers, they have learned that they must be careful with the quicksilver, and potentially lethal, power of romantic love.

*Othello* (1603). When we first meet them, Othello and Desdemona are 'in love.' They are as newly wed, as head over heels, as any of the lovers in Shakespeare, including the star struck Romeo and Juliet. (In fact they are hot for one another, and their thoughts are on the bed; a more erotic love than we are used to in the comedies. Neither of them, by their own natures, would have thought of changing the condition they find themselves in. Shall we say that Othello's love is naïve? That he doesn't know what love is?

*Troilus and Cressida* (1601). Troilus and Cressida are embedded in the midst of a great squabble of a war, which seems to have lost its dignity and direction. We might compare them to two lovers in a Hemingway novel, caught in a fleeting but therefore extremely intense romance, in the midst of a world which is unravelling; or to the two lovers in Resnais' film, *Hiroshima*, their passion and despair equally divided. In the end Cressida comes off either as a flirt, or little disposed to repel her admirers, but at her most loving she makes beautiful linguistic music with Troilus in the Trojan camp. There is wit and even trendiness in the way Cressida flirts with Troilus before their love goes south, and she returns to the Greek side, to attract warriors of another contingent. The fidelity of a Romeo and Juliet is missing here, but for a while there is the passion of Othello and Desdemona.

*Romeo and Juliet*. (1594). Romeo and Juliet meet as teen agers, fall hopelessly in love with each other, but unfortunately belong to families which are bitter enemies of one another. They arrange, with the help of the sensitive Friar Lawrence, to get married, but Romeo, banished from the city, is killed before he can enjoy the fruits of his life. Star crossed love is the theme of this intense tale of youthful passion, and the stakes are so high that, in the end, we have to wonder what Shakespeare's attitude is to the whole adventure.

*Love's Labor's Lost* (1588). From the outset of the play, the King and his men struggle with the problem of chastity; it is the reason for their constitutional decision to devote three years to study and abstention from women, and it is the reason why the Princess of France, and her sisters, are obliged to camp outside the King's palace. From the outset of their encampment, the men more or less besiege the ladies, attacking them with wit, masquerades, and (to us, even in our enlightened moment) startlingly explicit talk about male sexual desire and (for example) ways in which it can promote women's sexual pleasure. The guys cannot do without the gals, but neither can they give in to letting the women break up their monastic project.

*Sonnets*. (1593-1600). In his sonnets, Shakespeare is preoccupied with the fatal power of time, to eat away at and finally destroy, the things we treasure most: the beauty of those we love, the perfection of the non transient truths and values of our daily world. In the transience of his lovers' beauty, in particular, he sees a threat to what is most meaningful in the world. The sonnets are full of delight in beauty and despair at the menacing fragility of beauty.