THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 173: FOOLING AROUND

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 173: FOOLING AROUND

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 173: Fooling Around. In this episode, we're going to look at the development of English comedy in the early modern era. We'll do that by examining some of William Shakespeare's early comedies. We'll also distinguish Shakespearean comedy from other types of comedic performances which had been popular for centuries. And we'll also look to Italy to see how developments in literature and drama there had an influence on the theater of Elizabethan England. And of course, as always, we'll see how those developments shaped the English language.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

And one other quick note. At the end of the last episode, I mentioned that I was going to discuss Romeo and Juliet this time, but I have decided to wait until the next episode to discuss that play. Since this episode will focus on developments in comedy, it doesn't really make sense to include a tragedy about young lovers. But we will look at Shakespeare's fascination with Italy in this episode, and that will provide some important context for the story of Romeo and Juliet next time.

Now before I delve into a discussion about English comedy during the Elizabethan period, I hope you have a good sense of humor. And if you're feeling a bit run down, maybe this episode will pick you up because, as we all know, laughter is the best medicine. That may seem like an old proverb, but it is actually found for the first time in the early 1900s. Nevertheless, the sentiment is widely accepted, and in fact, humor itself is derived from the practice of medicine. Well, at least the word ***humor*** is derived from medicine. In earlier episodes, I discussed the concept of the four humors – the four bodily fluids that determined one's health. It was a concept that can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, and it was still the dominant view in Elizabethan England in the late 1500s. But by that point, the word ***humor*** had started to acquire a new sense. The word was applied not only to a person's physical condition, but also to his or her mental condition or state of mind. So if you were in good health and in a positive state of mind, you were said to be in 'good humor.' And from there, the word ***humor*** came to refer to something that caused a person to be happy. By the mid-1600s, that modern sense of the word is clearly attested in English.

This episode is partially about humor in the modern sense of the word, not the medical sense. It's about the use of humor to entertain audiences during the Elizabethan period, and the ways in which writers like Shakespeare presented humor in their plays. It's also about the language of humor. And that's an important place to begin – with the intersection of language and comedy.

As humans, we can find humor in many different things. Obviously, if someone tells us a joke or recounts a funny story, that can make us laugh. And if we see actors performing a humorous scene in a movie or television show, that can also be funny. Of course, you might enjoy seeing a stand-up comedian perform a comedy routine. All of those types of comedy rely on the spoken word.

But of course, we don't need words to make us laugh. You might laugh at someone making a mistake, or falling down, or doing something silly. You might enjoy pratfalls or slapstick comedy. You might laugh at a funny video of someone's cat or dog doing something funny. You might enjoy the performance of a clown or a mime, assuming you actually like clowns and mines.

The fact is that humans have been entertained by both verbal and non-verbal comedy since the earliest forms of entertainment. The ancient Greeks and Romans both had drama, by which I mean scripted stories performed by actors. But they also had dancers, and singers, and jugglers, and acrobats, and magicians, and mimes, and many other types of entertainers. But what really distinguished early drama from most other forms of entertainment was the use of words to tell stories. Not merely reciting a poem to an audience, but the actual performance of a story by actors pretending to be other people and reciting dialogue that had been written ahead of time. It is that connection between theatrical performance and language that makes the study of drama so important for linguists. It is fascinating to see how the use of specific words by a performer can make people laugh, or cry, or think, or react in some other way.

As literacy spread over the course of the 1500s, people took advantage of the printing press to purchase relatively cheap books about many different topics. And that included joke books or 'jest books' as they were commonly called at the time. The first English jest-book was called 'A hundred Merry Tales,' and it appeared in 1526. But over the following decades, many more were published. They contained riddles, funny stories, and popular folk humor. Many of them contained English versions of fables and stories that had previously appeared in French, Spanish or Italian collections. [*SOURCE: A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies 1594-1603, Michael Mangan, 25.*]

While jest books appealed to an audience of readers, it wasn't the only type of humor that many of them enjoyed. They also found pleasure in puns, malapropisms, and other types of word play that were designed to entertain and amuse readers. And those were the same literary devices used by playwrights like the recently deceased Christopher Marlowe, and the new writer attracting attention around London named William Shakespeare. And that's part of the reason why the rise of the Elizabethan theater coincided with the rise in literacy in England. The use of wordplay and eloquent language in those plays appealed to an audience who was becoming accustomed to those literary features in the books they were reading. The same elevated language that turns off so many people today was the very thing that audiences wanted to hear in the late 1500s. They wanted to hear actors recite dialogue the blurred the line between poetry and prose. And writers like Shakespeare were more than happy to give them what they wanted.

In fact, Shakespeare's use of humorous word play is one of the things that makes his writing stand out among his contemporaries. And in the early part of his career as a playwright, he spent a lot of his time composing comedies. Most of his comedies were composed in the first half of his career. That included plays like the Comedy or Errors and Love's Labour's Lost, which we explored in the last episode. It also included plays like the Taming of the Shrew, the Two Gentlemen of Verona, and the Merchant of Venice, which we will examine in this episode. Those are some of his earliest comedies, and though they aren't necessarily his most revered works, they do suggest that he had a particular interest in light-hearted stories as a young playwright.

But as we've seen in prior episodes, none of those plays were being performed on the stages of London during the period from 1592 to 1594. During that period early in Shakespeare's career, most public gatherings in London had been banned due to a severe outbreak of bubonic plague. That period of lock down had a significant impact on the burgeoning theater scene in the city. Some of the acting companies managed to eek out a living by leaving the city and traveling around the country giving performances where they could. But many of the acting companies simply ceased to exist during that period.

The theaters were finally allowed to re-open in May of 1594. The plague had subsided, and the gathering of audiences was no longer considered to be a threat to public health. In the wake of the lock down, two major acting companies emerged from the rubble. As we saw in a prior episode, the Rose Theater south of the Thames was owned by Philip Henslowe. His detailed accounting records survive, and they indicate which plays were performed at the Rose and how much money each performance generated. Well, Henslowe was also the business manager of an acting company called The Lord Admiral's Men, and The Lord Admiral's Men survived the plague and continued to perform primarily at The Rose. Christopher Marlowe had written primarily for that acting company before he was murdered, and The Lord Admiral's Men continued to perform the plays of Marlowe and other writers at the Rose.

The other major acting company that survived the plague was known as The Lord Chamberlain's Men. That was the company that Shakespeare primarily wrote for, and by the following year, we have written evidence that he was an official member of that company. He would remain a member of that company as a writer, an actor and an investor until his retirement a couple of decades later. As the name implies, the company's patron was the Lord Chamberlain, whose name was Henry Carey. He was the head of the royal household. So he was in charge of the queen's entertainment, and that meant that his actors usually performed the plays that were featured at the royal court. [*SOURCE: Death By Shakespeare, Kathryn Harkup, p. 24*] In fact, after Elizabeth's death and the arrival of James I, they became known as The King's Men. But performances before the queen or king were relatively rare. For the most part, the actors performed at the oldest permanent theater in London called simply The Theatre. It was located in the northern suburbs of London, and its principal investor was a well-known actor named Richard Burbage.

Interestingly, before they went their separate ways, it appears that The Lord Admiral's Men and The Lord Chamberlain's Men actually performed together for a short period when the theaters initially re-opened. They had probably traveled together in the countryside over the prior two years, and according to Philip Henslowe's records for the Rose, the two companies performed a variety of plays together in June of 1594. Those plays included some dramas by Marlowe, as well as Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, which we looked at in the last episode. They also performed a play which is identified in the records as "the tamynge of A shrowe," which was apparently an early version of Shakespeare's 'The Taming of the Shrew.' [*SOURCE: Shakespeare: The Evidence, Ian Wilson, p. 191*]

The play itself is set in Padua – a city in northern Italy. The story centers around two sisters. The elder sister is named Katherina. She is assertive and difficult and is the titular shrew. She has a younger sister named Bianca who is sweet and pretty and is being pursued by several men. The problem is that the girls' father will not allow the younger sister to marry until the elder sister is married. So the men pursuing the younger sister have to figure out a way to find a husband for the elder sister. One of the young men finds a suitor named Petruchio, and he marries the elder sister. He then deprives her of food and clothing, and disagrees with everything she says, and he eventually wears her down to the point that she becomes obedient to him. Thus, the taming of the shrew. The younger sister marries one her suitors, and another of her suitors marries a rich widow. At the end of the play, the three now-married men debate whose wife is the most obedient. After placing a wager, they each send a servant for their respective wives to see which one will come in the most obedient way, and Petruchio's wife Katherina – the shrew – is the only one that comes. He wins the bet and surprises the other two men with how well he has tamed her.

Now obviously, this play isn't going to win any feminism awards these days, and modern audiences tend to find the plot to be problematic. For that reason, it isn't performed all that often today, but it is very much a product of the time in which it was written.

The play hasn't had much of an impact on the English language, probably because it isn't one of Shakespeare's more popular works. But he did introduce the word ***bedazzled*** in the play. And in an early passage, he gave us an early use of the phrase "***all of a sudden***" to mean 'suddenly.'

Now that passage is interesting because it shows a development in the language that was common during the Elizabethan period, but faded over time. And that was the use of the word ***sudden*** as a noun. If you think about it, the word ***sudden*** is really an adjective like a 'sudden explosion.' And it can be used as an adverb like "He suddenly appeared." But we don't really think of it as a noun. I mean, what is a 'sudden'? It's not really a thing. But in the late 1500s, it became common to use the word ***sudden*** as the object of an adverbial phrase like 'at the sudden,' and 'on a sudden,' and 'of a sudden,' which is the actual phrase that Shakespeare used here. They were all different ways of saying 'suddenly' by using the word as a noun.

Shakespeare used 'of a sudden' in a passage where the servant of one the suitors says, "I pray, sir, tell me, is it possible That love should of a sudden take hold?" So 'of a sudden take hold' rather than 'suddenly take hold.' It was just a more poetic way of saying the same thing. A few decades later in the mid-1600s, the more modern phrasing appeared with the word ***all***, thereby producing

the phrase “all of a sudden.” But again, this phenomenon of using the word ***sudden*** as a noun soon faded. Phrases like ‘at the sudden’ and ‘on a sudden’ largely disappeared. But for some reason, ‘all of a sudden” survived. It’s really just a vestige of that fad that was common in the Elizabethan period where people used the word ***sudden*** as noun in that way, and in which Shakespeare provided an early example in The Taming of the Shrew.

Now this particular play is somewhat unusual in that it is really a play within a play. And, by that, I mean that it has an introductory section that really exists separately from the main part of the story. That introductory section adds some additional humor to the play, and it sets up the main part of the story that follows. It features a character named Christopher Sly who identifies himself as a tinker. A ***tinker*** was someone who mended pots and kettles and other household utensils. It was unskilled work and, as a profession, it has been largely lost to history. The term ***tinker*** may come from the word ***tin*** because most of those pots and utensils were made of tin. Another theory is that term comes from the ‘tink tink’ sound that was made when a tinker would tap on the metal. Well, the noun may have largely disappeared, but around the time that this play was written, we find the term ***tinkering***, which refers to the actions or work of a tinker. And of course, the word still survives in that sense. If someone is trying to fix or repair something, they might ‘tinker’ with it. It usually refers to a clumsy or makeshift effort. And that sense of the word ***tinker*** was around in the Elizabethan period as well. And many tinkers were little more than beggars and con men trying to make a quick buck. So when Christopher Sly identifies himself as a tinker, it implies that he is a bit of a rogue.

Well the scene opens with a drunken Sly in an alehouse. He has broken some glasses and the hostess at the alehouse is yelling at him and telling him to leave. He responds by saying, “I’ll not budge an inch.” And that is actually the first recorded use of the phrase ‘not budge an inch’ in the English language. Today, we might say that someone ‘refuses to budge an inch.’

Well, even though Christopher Sly says he won’t budge an inch, he is forced to leave the alehouse anyway, and he soon falls asleep outside. While he is sleeping, a local Lord stumbles upon him. The Lord has been hunting, and he is accompanied by his hunting party. When they come across drunken Sly, they decide to play a practical joke on him. While he is still passed out, they take him back to the Lord’s residence and dress him in very nice clothing. When Sly wakes up from his stupor, they convince him that he is a nobleman who has gone mad and believes himself to be a poor laborer. One of the men says that Sly’s doctors have recommended that he see a “pleasant comedy.” The doctors have determined that his sadness has congealed his blood and had led to “frenzy” or insanity. “Therefore they thought it good to hear a play, And frame your mind to mirth and merriment, Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.” (End-quote) So as we can see, the proverb “laughter is the best medicine” may be relatively new, but the idea has been around for centuries.

Now of course, the play that is going to be performed for him is the story of the two sisters that I talked about earlier. But Sly replies to the recommendation by questioning the concept of a comedy. He says, “Is not a commonty a Christmas gambold or a tumbling-trick?” To which he is told, no, “it is more pleasing stuff.” And the play is described as “. . . a kind of history.” So what’s that all about?

Well, that exchange goes to the whole idea of comedy as entertainment during the Elizabethan period. First of all, instead of using the word ***comedy*** ('c-o-m-e-d-y'), Sly uses the word ***commonty*** ('c-o-m-m-o-n-t-y'). That's a malapropism. As we saw last time, a malapropism is what happens when someone intends to say one word, but instead, he or she says a different word by mistake. Some of Shakespeare's more dim-witted characters use malapropisms. And that's the case here. But why would he refer to the play as a ***commonty***, derived from the word ***common***? And why would he suggest that a comedy is a 'Christmas gambold,' which was a type of parlor game involving jumping and tumbling? He also refers to comedy as a 'tumbling-trick.' So he has a notion that comedy – or 'commonty' – is a common or base form of entertainment involving tumbling and physical activity. But he is corrected and told it is actually 'more pleasing stuff' and 'a kind of history.'

This entire exchange reflects the difference between traditional English entertainment and the relatively new form of literary comedy that was starting to appear on the stages of London. The new type of comedy that I described earlier had started to flourish in the wake of the printing press – and it was the type of comedy that the literate audiences of London wanted to see.

To better understand this distinction, we need to consider how comedy of the Elizabethan stage differed from the traditional forms of entertainment that were designed to make people laugh.

When we think of a Shakespearean play, we think about actors standing on a stage and either exchanging dialogue with other or perhaps engaging in an extended monologue. The focus is on the words they are using and the way they are being delivered. But traditionally, performers tended to make people laugh through physical activity or songs – not spoken words.

Traditional English comedy was largely unorganized and unstructured. It tended to me more improvised and spontaneous consisting of dancing, music-making, tumbling, frolicking, sporting contests, and just having fun. This type of activity was common at seasonal festivals and holiday celebrations. Even when miracle plays and morality plays were staged in the late Middle Ages, this type of merriment was often employed alongside those plays. People enjoyed light-hearted entertainment before and after the plays that told stories from the Bible and taught morality lessons. That is what Christopher Sly is referring to when he says that comedy is a Christmas gambold or a tumbling trick.

But the new type of comedy composed by playwrights like William Shakespeare and rendered on the stages of London used comedy in a different way. It introduced comedic situations into the storylines like confusion, mistaken identity, practical jokes and the like. In fact, this whole introductory section involving Christopher Sly is based on a practical joke and confusion and even mistaken identity to a certain extent. All of this can be traced back to the drama of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but it wasn't common in England until the rise of the theater in the late 1500s.

English playwrights like Shakespeare adopted many of those Greek and Roman elements into their comedies, and also incorporated comedic elements into the dialogue they wrote. The characters often used wordplay like puns and malapropisms. And they exchanged witty remarks

and sometimes witty insults. It was a more deliberate and structured form of comedy. So while Christopher Sly anticipates frolicking and something typically found at a holiday festival, what he is about to see is more polished and designed for audiences that wanted to be entertained by the actor's words, not just the actor's movements and actions and silly faces.

Even though this new type of theatrical comedy was based on Greek and Roman traditions, it was not the exact same thing. Greek and Roman drama was actually more musical than Elizabethan drama. Greek drama relied heavily on choruses. Choruses were groups of singers who appeared between the scenes of the play. They would sing and dance. And they were really a character in themselves. Through the songs, the chorus would comment on the action in the play, ask questions, and express opinions about the storyline. The chorus also helped to break the story into separate segments, which later became separate acts. [*SOURCE: History of the Theatre, 8th ed., Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, p. 25-6*.]

And of course, this is where we get the word ***chorus***. It's a Greek word, and it appeared in English during the early period of Elizabethan drama in the 1560s. Some of the early English plays used a chorus in the Greek fashion, but it soon disappeared. By the time of Shakespeare a couple of decades later, it had largely been replaced with an individual who served essentially the same role as the chorus.

Greek plays not only had a chorus, they also sometimes featured improvised songs. And dialogue was often accompanied by music. [*SOURCE: History of the Theatre, 8th ed., Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, p. 27*.] This musical form of drama actually helps to explain the origin of Greek terms like ***comedy*** and ***tragedy***. Remember that in the Greek and Roman traditions, ***drama*** was the general term for stories presented on the stage in front of an audience. And there were two types of dramas – comedies and tragedies. And they were very distinct genres. They didn't really mix.

It's a bit of an oversimplification, but comedies and tragedies were distinct in part because they featured contrasting story arcs. Comedies usually began with some kind of trouble or conflict and had a peaceful or satisfying ending. By contrast, tragedies usually began with calm and ended with conflict, misery, destruction and a fall from grace. [*SOURCE: A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies 1594-1603, Michael Mangan, p. 107*.] So they had opposite trajectories.

Though comedies and tragedies evolved into distinct and contrasting art forms, both of those forms of drama actually had similar beginnings in ancient Greece, and those beginnings were tied to music and song. The word ***tragedy*** literally meant a 'goat song' in ancient Greek, and the word ***comedy*** meant a 'carnival song.'

Tragedy combined the Greek word ***tragos*** meaning 'goat' with an early form of the word ***ode*** meaning 'a song.' So as I said, a ***tragedy*** was a 'goat song.' Even though most scholars agree with that etymology, they aren't entirely sure why it was called that. The exact connection to goats is a little unclear. One idea is that the word is derived from festivals where actors and singers dressed as satyrs wearing goatskins. Another idea is that the most successful singer won a

goat as a prize. But regardless of the original connection to goats, the word ***tragedy*** passed from Greek, to Latin and then into English during the Middle English period.

And just as a ***tragedy*** was originally a 'goat song,' a ***comedy*** was originally a 'carnival or festival song.' It combined the ancient Greek word ***komos*** meaning 'a festival with music and dancing' with that same early form of the word ***ode*** meaning 'a song.' Obviously, the trajectory of this word and the entertainment it represented took it in a vastly different direction from the 'goat song' or ***tragedy***. But both words have roots in the festival entertainment of ancient Greece. The word ***comedy*** followed alongside the word ***tragedy*** as it eventually made its way to England in the 1300s.

Greek drama not only featured song and dance, it also sometimes included mimes. In fact, mime was an art form in itself. Now, Greek mime wasn't exactly what we think of as mime today. The mime performers usually worked together as a group, and they did sometimes speak and sing to explain aspects of the story they were performing. But the performance was mostly physical, and unlike regular actors who wore masks on stage, the mimes didn't wear masks because their facial expressions were an important part of their storytelling. [*SOURCE: History of the Theatre, 8th ed., Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, p. 45-6*.] As I noted, mime was a physical form of drama. The emphasis was on the movement of the body – not words. Mime activity also included dancing, tumbling and juggling. So in that regard, it was somewhat similar to the traditional type of English entertainment that Christopher Sly referred to. And in fact, mimes may have been the first professional entertainers in Greece.

Of course, the word ***mime*** also produced the word ***mimic***. To 'mimic' something is to copy or imitate it. It reflects the characteristics of a mime. In fact, that how the word ***mimic*** first appeared in English. It was used as an adjective to describe the actions of a mime, and it is first recorded in 1591, around the time that the plague closed the theaters of London. The word ***mime*** itself appeared a short time later, and was initially used in English to refer to a crude form of comedy using mimicry.

So mimes can be traced all the way back to the ancient Greeks. And of course, many aspects of Greek culture was adopted by the Romans. That included Greek drama. Many elements of Greek drama were incorporated into Roman drama. For example, the Roman actors wore masks like the Greeks. And Roman drama also included mimes.

But Roman mimes created a new style of performance. Rather that operating together as an ensemble, sometimes a single performer would tell an entire story by himself. He would perform a dance or otherwise use his body to represent a variety of characters to tell the story. Since he portrayed all of the characters, the Greek word ***panto*** meaning 'all' was added to the word ***mime***, thereby producing the word ***pantomime***. Pantomime was different from traditional mime not only in the fact that it was a solo performance, but also because the pantomime performer never spoke. The performance was often accompanied by music and singing, but that was done by a chorus or someone other than the performer. Pantomime was also more artistic than traditional mime. The performer wore a mask like other actors, and the humor tended to be more sophisticated and less bawdy than regular mime. In may ways, Roman pantomime was really the

forerunner of ballet, which emerged in the early modern period. [*SOURCE: History of the Theatre, 8th ed., Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, p. 59*.]

Now I think that little digression into Greek and Roman theater will be very helpful as we move forward with this episode. Those ancient forms of drama not only contributed some words that appeared during the Elizabethan period, but they also established a tradition that mixed word-based drama with entertainment that involved singing, dancing, and the use of gestures. But these styles of entertainment remained distinct during the Elizabethan period. Comedies didn't really included tragic elements, and tragedies didn't include comedic elements. And both types of dramas focused on dialogue and story-telling through words. They only included dancing or singing when the storyline called for it.

But while the dramas themselves focused on storytelling through dialogue, audiences still loved those other forms of entertainment. So the performers looked for ways to combine the two styles of entertainment without destroying the integrity of the play itself.

The most common way of doing that was to simply take a break between the acts of a play to spontaneously entertain the audience with a comedic performance. Audiences actually loved those little breaks because it provided a nice change of pace. These types of comic interludes were especially common in French drama. Since they were stuffed or crammed in between the regular acts of the play, they were described with the French word ***farcir*** meaning 'to stuff.' And that produced the word ***farce***. Originally, a ***farce*** was one of those little brief performances stuffed in between the acts of a play. They were usually humorous in nature. So within English, the word ***farce*** still retains that original sense of low comedy or ludicrous satire. The word is first recorded in English in the 1530s, but it became more common during the Elizabethan period.

I just referred to those little performances between the acts of a play as comic interludes. Well, we've encountered that word ***interlude*** before in the podcast. You might remember than an interlude was technically any type of performance in between other activities. In earlier episodes, I noted that English plays were originally called ***interludes*** because they were themselves originally performed as short skits in between other types of entertainment. ***Lude*** was a Latin verb that meant 'to play.' So an ***interlude*** was a type of playful performance 'in between' other activities. And a ***prelude*** was a playful performance 'before' other activities. In fact, that entire introduction to the Taming of the Shrew with the prank on Christopher Sly was really a prelude to the main story.

Well, in addition to preludes and interludes, most Elizabethan plays also featured a ***postlude***, which was a type of performance 'after' the main play. After the final act, performers would interact and improvise songs with the audience, they would dance, and they might perform a funny sketch. There might also be some tumbling or mock stage-fighting. It was a light-hearted and often bawdy way to end the evening – even after the performance of a serious tragedy. [*SOURCE: A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies 1594-1603, Michael Mangan, p. 66*.] And it was a great way to incorporate those traditional forms of entertainment into the new type of Elizabethan drama. We don't get a sense of these postludes today because the surviving scripts of

the plays only include the main part of the play, but those improvised performances after the play were extremely popular.

Around the time that the plague ravaged London in the early 1590s, those performances after the main play started to be called ***jigs***. Of course, a ***jig*** is a type of dance, but the term could also apply to the music that accompanied the dance. And it is probably from the that sense that the word ***jig*** was extended to these post-show performances. The idea was to send the audience home laughing, even if they had just watched a depressing tragedy. So the term ***jig*** was extended to these songs and dances and post-show skits. But it could also refer more generally to jests and practical jokes, and other types of trickery and misdirection. It was all part of the fun. Well, from that sense of 'trickery or deception,' we get the phrase 'the jig is up' meaning the trick or deception is over because it has been revealed. Again, those extended senses of ***jig*** are recorded for the first time in the early 1590s.

Now Shakespeare actually made reference to these jigs in one of his plays. In Hamlet, the story features another play within a play. Of course, Hamlet is a later tragedy, but within the story, the characters put on their own play. And when one of the characters named Polonius complains about the length of one of the passages, Hamlet dismisses the complaint by saying "he's for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps." In other words, Polonius doesn't appreciate a good play. He only likes the jig or bawdy tale. Otherwise he falls asleep.

That comment reflects the tension between traditional English comedy and the newer theatrical comedy at the time. Some people loved the word play and puns and comedic situations featured in Elizabethan plays, but other people found it boring. They just wanted the old-fashioned comedy of the jig. This tension is also reflected in another passage from Hamlet. In a separate passage, Hamlet instructs the actors to beware of comedians who might depart from the script and play to the crowd in the traditional way to get laughs. He says, "let those that play your clowns / speak no more than is set down for them." He then adds that if they depart from the script, they will be focused on getting laughs which will distract from the true meaning of the play. That concern is probably why the jigs were reserved for the end of the evening after the play itself was over. English playwrights didn't want to incorporate those elements into the plays themselves. They would only tolerate them before, after, or in between the acts of the play.

In addition to the jigs, some English plays also featured separate sections or interludes where some of the actors would dance or mime a short performance without speaking. The performance was designed to summarize or supplement the main storyline of the play. That type of performance was called a ***dumb show*** from the old sense of the word ***dumb*** as someone who doesn't speak.

The use of jigs and dumb shows is important to the development of English comedy because it illustrates how traditional English comedy continued to exist alongside the newer theatrical form of comedy.

In that passage from Hamlet that I read a moment ago, Shakespeare referred to the comedic actors in the play as 'clowns.' That was actually a relatively new word in the language at the time. It is first recorded about three decades earlier. It was apparently borrowed from Dutch or Low German, but it had a slightly different meaning at the time. It originally referred to a peasant or rustic person from the countryside.

Of course, people in large cities like London often viewed those types of people as simpletons who where were unsophisticated and uncultured. So they were often ridiculed. Shakespeare's use of the word is actually consistent with that original definition because the characters he referred to in that passage were indeed rustic characters from the countryside. But around this same time in the late 1590s, the more modern meaning of the word ***clown*** started to emerge. It came to be a general term for a fool or jester.

In fact, the word ***clown*** started to replace existing terms like ***fool*** and ***jester*** around this time. Those were the traditional terms used for entertainers who made people laugh. Both words still exist today, but ***fool*** has acquired a slightly different sense as a stupid person, and ***jester*** seems like a relic of the past.

Another similar term that was emerging during this period was the word ***comedian***. Though the word ***comedy*** had been around in English for a couple of centuries by this point, the word ***comedian*** was new to the language. It's recorded for the first time in the 1580s. But in its earliest usage, it referred to someone who wrote comedies, not someone who performed them. So Shakespeare would have been considered a comedian since he wrote the plays, but the comedic actors would not have been considered comedians. The word was gradually extended to performers in the early 1600s.

Regardless of the term used, whether it be ***clown*** or ***fool*** or ***jester***, it required a very talented performer, and the person who took on that role was often the most popular member of the cast. And in the period before Shakespeare arrived in London, the most popular comedian on the English stage was Richard Tarlton. People came in droves to see him perform, and he was Queen Elizabeth's favorite clown. But Tarlton died in the late 1580s just as Shakespeare was arriving on the scene. Fortunately for Shakespeare, the man who succeeded Tarlton as one of the most popular comedic actors was Will Kemp, and Kemp was a member of Shakespeare's acting company. It is widely believed that Kemp played most of the humorous characters in Shakespeare's plays.

Now I've mentioned terms like ***clown***, ***comedian***, ***fool*** and ***jester***. But there was another relatively new term that was sometimes used to refer to these comedic performers. And that was the word ***buffoon***. Again, much like the word ***fool***, the word is often used today to refer to a stupid person, but in its original sense, it also meant a comedic actor or performer. And ***buffoon*** is an important term because it represents a very important link in this story, and that is the link to Italy and Italian comedy.

The word ***buffoon*** is ultimately a product of Italian comedy, and it is an example of onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia refers to a word that is created by imitating or mimicking a specific sound. And in this case, the word ***buffoon*** began as an attempt to mimic a puffing or blowing sound. Whereas, we would describe that sound as a ***puff*** in English, in Italian it was described with the similar-sounding word ***buff***. And that produced the Italian word ***buffare*** which meant 'to puff out one's cheeks.' Well, at one time, that was apparently a comic gesture. And that produced the word ***buffa***, which meant a joke or jest. And since clowns or other comedic performers would puff out their cheeks to entertain the audience, they became known as ***buffoons***. And that word made its way into English around the current point in our overall story in the 1580s. So when Shakespeare was writing his early comedies, the fools or jesters could also be called ***buffoons*** with that relatively new word in the language.

I mentioned that the word ***buffoon*** provides an interesting link to Italian comedy because, as it turns out, a lot of terms associated with comedy actually come from Italian thanks to the comedic tradition that developed in Italy. And that tradition influenced English writers like Shakespeare.

The most influential aspect of Italian comedy was the commedia dell'arte which appeared in Italy in the mid-1500s. I discussed that development back in Episode 152.

The term commedia dell'arte refers to a specific type of Italian comedic performance, and it is important to our story because it started to influence English drama in the late 1500s. As we've seen, English drama didn't really include dancing and singing and tumbling and mime performance within the plays themselves. Of course, those elements were included if the storyline called for it, but otherwise, those elements were not incorporated into the play. They could placed before or after the play or maybe even in between the acts of the play. But the play itself remained as written. So traditional comedy and theatrical comedy existed side-by-side.

But in Italy, street performers started to mix all of those elements together to create a new type of performance. This new dramatic style called commedia dell'arte had much of the structure of a traditional play with a specific storyline, but there was no actual script. The performers improvised most of their lines, and they interacted with the audience. The performances also included physical comedy like dancing, juggling, and tumbling, among other activities. So we have the structured storyline of a traditional Greco-Roman comedy, but the loose, physical, improvised performances associated with traditional festival comedy.

The commedia dell'arte also featured a small group of stock characters. So regardless of the specific storyline, the characters were almost always the same. And each character had a specific name and costume. The performers usually wore masks as well. And in Italy, each stock character represented a different part of the peninsula, so each character usually spoke in the unique dialect of the region they represented.

For example, the character of Pantalone was a merchant from Venice. So he usually spoke Italian with a Venetian accent. Pantalone was typically an older man, and he wore bright red trousers or leggings. As I've noted before, the character was so closely associated with that item of clothing that his name produced the word ***pantaloons*** in English. The term was later shortened to ***pants*** in

American English. So whenever you refer to your trousers as ***pants***, you are actually harkening back to the Italian comedy of the late 1500s.

Well, the performers of the Italian commedia dell'arte traveled throughout Western Europe, and even made their way to England. So English playwrights and actors became familiar with that style of comedy. And Shakespeare's early plays also reflect that influence.

In fact, he actually gives us one of the first recorded uses of the word ***Pantaloon*** in English. And it appears in The Taming of the Shrew which we looked at earlier. Remember that the storyline of the main part of the play involves the pursuit of a younger sister by several men. One of those suitors is an old man named Gremio. And in one of the scenes, a younger suitor refers to him as "the old pantaloon." (III.1.36) That is clearly a reference to the stock character from Italian comedy, which was apparently the inspiration for Shakespeare's character in this early play.

Back in Episode 152 where I discussed the origins of commedia dell'arte, I gave several examples of common words that entered English from that style of comedy like ***slapstick***, which was originally a prop stick that one character would use to beat another character. It also contributed the word ***zany*** to the English language. ***Zany*** originally referred to class of stock characters who were servants. They were called ***zanni*** in Italian, and they included the well-known character of Harlequin. As I noted in that earlier episode, Harlequin contributed to the development of the modern clown that we know today with make-up and a funny costume. And interestingly, the Italian word ***zanni*** shows the same development as the word ***clown***. Just like the word ***clown*** which I discussed earlier, the word ***zanni*** originally referred to someone who was from the countryside. So it has sense of someone rural or rustic. ***Zany*** actually comes from a Venetian dialect version of the name ***Gianni***, from ***Giovanni***. And like with English comedy, the Italian ***zanni*** characters evolved from rural servants to clowns and jesters. And the when the word ***zanni*** – or ***zany*** – entered English, it had that same sense as a clown.

In fact, one of the first uses of that word ***zany*** in English occurred in Shakespeare's play Love's Labour's Lost, which we looked at last time. In fact, if we assume that the wording of the First Folio version we have today is the same as Shakespeare's original draft in the early 1590s, then it is probably the oldest known use of the word in English. You might remember from my discussion of that episode last time that the story involved the pursuit of the ladies attending the French princess by several men who were the companions of the King of Navarre. Near the end of the play, the ladies switch their clothing in order to confuse the men. In response, one of the men – Birone – tells the princess that she is "some slight zany." In other words, the ladies are acting like Italian clowns by switching their clothing to play a joke on the men.

So we can see in these examples that Shakespeare was incorporating the language of Italian commedia dell'arte into his early comedies. Like most Elizabethans, he was fascinated with Italian culture, including Italian poetry and drama. Many of his plays can be traced back to earlier Italian sources. And given that some of those sources had not be translated into English yet, some scholars think Shakespeare even had basic working knowledge of the Italian language.

Of course, the play we looked earlier – The Taming of the Shrew – was set in Italy. And part of the plot of that play is derived from an earlier Italian comedy called 'I Suppositi' which meant 'the substitutes or changelings.' In that case, Shakespeare may have encountered the story from an English translation composed in the mid-1500s.

The Taming of the Shrew was one of many plays that he chose to set in Italy. Over and over again, he turned to Italy to provide the backdrop for his stories. In fact, you might be surprised by the number of his plays that are set there, including those set in ancient Rome. The First Folio of his works contains 36 plays. That is really the standard Shakespeare canon. 14 of those 36 plays are set in England or the British Isles more generally. That includes his ten history plays about various English kings, as well as Macbeth, which is set in Scotland. In addition to the 14 plays set in Britain, another 12 are set in Italy. So there are almost as many plays set in Italy as in Britain. The remaining 10 plays are set in various locations. So those numbers illustrate Shakespeare's fascination with all things Italian. No matter what kinds of stories he wrote, or where he chose to set them, his mind always returned to Italy.

Shakespeare's obsession with Italy is reflected in another one of his early comedies. That play is called The Two Gentlemen of Verona, and once again, it's another comedy set in Italy. It is actually difficult to put a date on this particular play because it is only mentioned once in any document from Shakespeare's lifetime, and that document is the list of his plays prepared by Francis Meres in 1598. I've mentioned that list before because it appears to be a list of all of Shakespeare's plays up to that point. So based on that list, we know that the Two Gentlemen of Verona was composed prior to 1598. Beyond that limited piece of evidence, most scholars consider the play to be a very early play. Some have even suggested that it might have been the first play he wrote. The general opinion of most critics is that isn't as good as his later more successful plays. So they think it is the work of a younger and less mature playwright. The structure of the play is also more consistent with his earlier works.

The story involves two friends from Verona in northern Italy. The friends are Valentine and Proteus. Valentine leaves to go to Milan – another city in northern Italy. He travels there to study at the court of the Duke of Milan. Meanwhile, Proteus stays behind in Verona because he is in love with a local girl named Julia. But his father soon requires him to go to Milan as well. He leaves Julia behind and joins his friend Valentine. When Proteus arrives in Milan, he learns that Valentine has fallen in love with the Duke's daughter named Silvia and they are soon to be married. But Proteus also falls in love with Silvia when he sees her. So he sabotages the marriage plans between Silvia and his friend Valentine. Porteus wants Silvia for himself, but his girlfriend from Verona soon arrives in Milan to check on him, but she disguises herself as a male page to hide her identity. Eventually, all is revealed, and when Proteus realizes the page is actually his girlfriend Julia, he recalls his love for her. In the end, Proteus marries his girlfriend Julia, and Valentine rekindles his relationship with the Duke's daughter Silvia, and they also get married.

Within this play, we have a comedy set in Italy, and we also have a female character who cross-dresses as a page boy. This would prove to be a common device in Shakespeare's plays. Time and again, male characters pretend to be females, and females pretend to be males. That may also represent another influence from Italian commedia dell'arte. It was somewhat unusual in the

English tradition for a female character to pretend to be a man, but it was quite common within the commedia dell'arte of Italy. Regardless of the source, Shakespeare employed that device in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, and he would employ it again and again in his subsequent plays.

We also have to keep in mind the gender-bending nature of these types of storylines. Since females were not allowed to act in plays in England, all female characters had to be portrayed by men or teenage boys. But in the context of a play like The Two Gentlemen of Verona, a female character has to pretend to be a male. So we have a male actor playing a female role, who is then pretending to be male. It required a talented actor to pull it off, and again, it may reflect a tradition that had developed in Italy over the prior few decades.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona also provides another apparent link to the Italian commedia dell'arte. The play features two clownish servants – one serving Valentine and one serving Proteus. These are basically the equivalent of Zanni characters in the Italian comedies.

Now at some point after the composition of The Two Gentlemen of Verona and the Taming of the Shrew, Shakespeare once again turned to Italy for another comedy. This time, the play was called The Merchant of Venice. And I said it is a comedy, but as we'll see, that classification is complicated. It may be considered a comedy, but it also has a lot of tragic elements, or at least elements that aren't usually associated with comedy. And for that reason, it shows how the genres were starting to blend together as the English theater became more mature and as it started to find it own unique voice.

The Merchant of Venice is another play that is difficult to date with any precision. Like the other plays we have encountered so far, it is included in the list of Shakespeare plays that Francis Meres compiled in 1598, so we know it was composed prior to that point. For various reasons, most scholars think it was composed sometime between 1595 and 1597, in the period after the theaters re-opened after the plague.

The Merchant of Venice has proven to be a very popular play over the centuries, and for that reason, it has had a greater impact on the language that the others we have considered so far. Despite the popularity of the play, it has also proven to be controversial. One of the most prominent characters is the Jewish moneylender named Shylock. And many people are uncomfortable with the Jewish stereotype that he represents. But as with most things Shakespeare, nothing is ever that simple. Shylock is a complicated character, and in many ways, he is also a sympathetic character. The story can be read and interpreted in many different ways.

With respect to the Jewish stereotypes that Shakespeare presents, we have to keep in mind that there was no Jewish culture to speak of in England during the period in which Shakespeare lived. Way back in Episode 111, I noted that the English king in the late 1200s was Edward I – the king who is sometimes known to history as 'Longshanks.' And he ordered all Jews to be expelled from England during his reign. So Jewish culture had been largely unknown in England since then. The popular perception of Jewish people was based on stereotypes which had been around for centuries. And Shakespeare's play also reflects those common stereotypes.

Of course, anti-Semitism wasn't limited to England. It was common throughout Europe, but one of the few places where Jews enjoyed a bit of a safe haven was Venice in northern Italy. In the late 1400s, the Venetian Senate allowed Jews from other parts of Europe and the Mediterranean to live in the city, but they were restricted to a specific part of the city. That part of the city was called ***Getto*** in Italian. [*The Shakespeare Guide to Italy, Richard Paul Roe, p. 125-6.*]

The ultimate source of the word ***Getto*** is disputed, but the most popular idea is that the area had once been home to a foundry where metal was cast. The local Venetian word for a foundry was ***getto*** – 'g-e-t-t-o.' So this part of the city acquired that name. As I noted, it was the Jewish enclave in Venice. And from this original source, the word spread far and wide and ultimately produced the modern word ***ghetto*** used in English today. The modern word usually refers to an impoverished part of a city, but it also usually refers to an area inhabited mostly by people who are an ethnic or racial minority. And that ethnic or racial sense of the word helps to establish a connection back to the original ghetto found in Venice. By the way, Shakespeare didn't actually use the word ***ghetto*** in The Merchant of Venice or any of his other plays. In fact, the word isn't found in English until the early 1600s near the end of Shakespeare life.

As I noted in that earlier episode about the expulsion of Jews from England, European Christians had a complicated relationship with the Jewish minority in their countries. The Church prohibited Christians from charging interest on loans. Of course, there were many ways to get around that restriction, but Judaism permitted the charging of interest if the person paying the interest was not Jewish. So Jewish businessmen became prominent lenders of money throughout Europe. Christian borrowers were more than happy to take money from the Jewish lenders when they were in debt, but they hated to repay the loans with interest. So the lender who was a godsend in one moment was often treated with disdain when the debt came due. This conflict informs the story that Shakespeare tells in The Merchant of Venice, and again, it inevitably played on certain stereotypes that existed at the time, and to a certain extent, still exist today.

As I noted, Shakespeare's moneylender is named Shylock, and many sources suggest that the character's name is the ultimate source of the word ***shyster*** meaning a crooked lawyer or, more generally, a crook or swindler. But that appears to be a false etymology. Most modern scholars trace the word ***shyster*** back to the German slang term ***scheisser*** – literally 'one who defecates,' but used to refer to a contemptible person.

Now despite the prominent role of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, he is not the actual merchant in the play. The title character is a merchant named Antonio. Like many Venetian merchants, Antonio is involved in shipping and international trade. The play begins with Antonio and a friend having a conversation where Antonio says he is feeling sad and doesn't know why. The friend asks if he is worried about his business failing – or if he has unrequited love. Antonio answers 'no' to both questions. The friend suggests that Antonio isn't really sad then. Maybe he just isn't happy. The friend says that some people laugh at everything, while others never crack a smile even at the funniest joke, or as Shakespeare put it, ". . they'll not show their teeth in way of smile, Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable." I mention that passage because it is the first known use of the word ***laughable*** in an English document. The word ***laugh*** is an old word going

all the way back to Old English, but this is the first time we can document it being used as an adjective in that way.

Antonio has a close friend named Bassanio who is deeply in debt. Bassianio is in love with a rich heiress named Portia who lives in another town, but he needs money to travel there and present himself as a successful suitor. So he reaches out to his friend Antonio – the titular merchant. He tells Antonio that if he can borrow the money from him, he will be able to pay off all of his debts when he has married Portia since she is very wealthy.

But Antonio's money is tied up in his merchant vessels, so he can't actually lend the money to Bassanio. Since Bassanio's credit is too bad to obtain his own loan, Antonio agrees to act as a guarantor if the loan can be obtained from someone else. In other words, Antonio will agree to pay back the loan if Bassanio defaults.

With the plan in place, the two men approach Shylock to obtain the loan. But Shylock hesitates. While discussing the charging of interest with Antonio, Shylock refers to a story from the Bible. Antonio then turns to his friend Bassanio and says "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." This is the source of that commonly-recited phrase meaning that good things are sometimes twisted and put to use for bad purposes.

We then learn why Shylock is reluctant to make the loan. He and Antonio have a history. In the past, Antonio has bullied Shylock. Antonio has mocked him, spit on him and ridiculed his religion. Shylock now mocks Antonio in return. He says, ". . . Shall I bend low and in a bondsmen's key, With bated breath and whispering humbleness, Say this: 'Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last; You spurn'd me such a day; another time You call'd me a dog; and for these courtesies, I'll lend you thus much moneys?" Now I mention that passage because Shylock used the term 'bated breath,' and that passage contains the first known use of that term. It appears to be a term that Shakespeare coined for the play. ***Bated*** is really just a shortened form of the word ***abated*** – meaning reduced or lessened. So if someone responds with 'bated breath,' it means that their breathing has been subdued, usually due to fear, or nervousness, or anticipation. The word ***bate*** (b-a-t-e) and its common variation ***bated*** are rarely used today outside of this particular term found in the Merchant of Venice.

After a back and forth between Shylock and Antonio, Shylock finally makes a proposal. He will agree make the loan, and he'll make it at no interest. But if the loan is not repaid in full on the due date, then "let the forfeit Be nominated for an equal pound Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken In what part of your body pleaseth me." So if Bassanio and Antonio default, Shylock will literally take a knife to Antonio's body and remove a pound of his flesh, almost certainly resulting in Antonio's death. Obviously, this is the origin of the modern phrase 'a pound of flesh' referring to something that is legally or morally owed, but which is paid under very harsh circumstances. So if you 'exact a pound of flesh' from someone, you getting what's technically due to you, but it's not a pleasant experience for the person who has to pay. Surprisingly, Antonio agrees to the deal. He is confident that his merchant ships will arrive in time to repay Shylock in full.

With the terms of the loan agreed to, we're then introduced to Shylock's servant – a clownish character named Launcelot. And once again, we see the connection to the Italian zanni – the clownish servants of Italian comedy. Just like in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, the comedic servant provides some laughs and entertainment for the audience. It's also a reminder that this is indeed a comedy, despite the heavy subject matter.

In terms of the English language, there is a very interesting passage at this point involving the servant Launcelot and his blind father. Lancelot encounters his father on the street, but due to his father's blindness, his father doesn't recognize him. The father asks the apparent stranger if he knows where Launcelot dwells. Of course, being a clown, Launcelot initially plays a joke on his father and pretends to be someone else. But eventually he reveals his identity to his father by saying "at the length truth will out." In other words, 'the truth will always come out in the end.' This passage between Launcelot and his father is the first known use of that phrase. It may be another example of a phrase coined by Shakespeare.

Another fascinating aspect of the exchange between Launcelot and his father concerns the pronoun forms used during the conversation. The father begins by using the formal pronoun ***you*** when he is referring to the man who he considers to be a stranger. But when Launcelot reveals his identify, the father stops using the formal pronoun ***you*** and switches to the informal pronouns ***thee*** and ***thou***. It's a subtle change that most readers or viewers of the play never even notice, but it shows how Shakespeare distinguished those pronoun forms – as people still did in England in the late 1500s. You would have addressed a stranger – certainly one of equal or higher standing – with the formal pronoun ***you***. And you would have addressed a close family member or someone of lower standing with the informal pronouns ***thee*** and ***thou***. And that's what Launcelot's father does in this particular passage switching forms as the identity of the other person is revealed.

We are then introduced to Shylock's daughter named Jessica. Now this may come as a surprise to you, but this is actually the first recorded use of the name ***Jessica***. It appears to be a name that Shakespeare invented for this play. Most scholars agree that it is derived from an obscure female character in the Book of Genesis named Iscah – 'I-s-c-a-h.' Iscah was a relative of Abraham, and it appears that Shakespeare anglicized that name slightly to produce the name ***Jessica*** for Shaylock's daughter. Of course, the name would go on to become one of the most popular names in the English language, especially in the United States. It was one of the top ten names used for girls in the US throughout the last quarter of the 1900s, and it was the number one name for girls from 1985 to 1990. It's popularity has faded slightly in recent years, but now you know that it was a named coined by William Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice.

We soon learn that Jessica is about to elope with a Christian man named Lorenzo. She disguises herself as a man, takes a large amount of her father's money, and leaves to be with Lorenzo. So once again, we have a cross-dressing female character. As I've noted, this was a popular feature of Shakespeare's comedies and an idea that may have been influenced by the Italian commedia dell'arte. And as we'll see, this isn't the only example of that type of cross-dressing in the play. Well, when Shylock learns that his daughter has left him and taken his money, and has done so to marry a Christian man, he is stricken with grief. Jessica's new husband Lorenzo is a friend of the merchant Antonio, so once again, Shylock put the blame on Antonio.

Now remember that the merchant Antonio is on the hook for the debt, but he wasn't the one who received the money. The money actually went to his friend Bassanio who needed it to pursue the rich heiress Portia. Well, we now learn that Bassanio has successfully pursued her, and they have gotten married. But shortly after the marriage, Bassanio receives a letter from Antonio. In the letter, Antonio reveals that his ships have been wrecked at sea, and that he is not going to be able to repay Shylock. Antonio asks Bassanio to return to Venice for what will be his inevitable death at the hands of Shylock. Antonio writes that all debts between the two of them will be forgiven if Bassanio is able to return to Venice. The actual passage in the letter is "all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death."

I actually referred to this passage in an earlier episode about English pronouns – Episode 54 to be precise. And that's because English teachers tell us that the correct pronoun form after the word ***between*** is "you and me" – not "you and I." So you should say "between you and me," not Shakespeare's "between you and I." That is because ***me*** is the pronoun form that we use as the object of a sentence, like when we say "You see me." We also use it as the object of a prepositional phrase, like "Give it to me." Well, ***between*** is a preposition, so the pronouns that follow it are the objects of the prepositional phrase. Therefore, grammarians say that you should say "between you and me" since those are the forms normally used in that position. But this technical rule is often ignored in normal speech, and many people cite Shakespeare's use of "between you and I" in this passage to point out that even the greatest writer in English didn't always follow the standard rules. Of course, the modern rules of grammar were not fully in place during Shakespeare's lifetime, so that also explains why he sometimes used words in ways that would not be acceptable in English class today.

Well, after reading Antonio's letter, Bassanio heads back to Venice to save him from Shylock's wrath. Bassanio now has his new wife's wealth at his disposal, so he can pay Shylock far more the original loan amount to settle the debt. But back in Venice, Shylock refuses. He wants revenge, not money. But before he can exact his pound of flesh, the dispute has to go to trial to determine if the terms are legal and binding.

Bassanio's new wife Portia has a cousin who is a law professor. And apparently after consulting with him, a plan is devised. Portia and her friend Nerissa will travel to Venice. They will dress as men and pretend to be a lawyer and a clerk sent by the professor to observe the trial. So once again, we have women cross-dressing as men. And given that Shylock's daughter Jessica also cross-dressed as a man earlier in the play, that means that all three female characters in the play engage in cross-dressing. Again, this plot device may reflect Italian influence.

Well, Portia and Nerissa arrive in Venice, and Portia pretends to be a lawyer sent at the recommendation of her prominent cousin. The local Duke is impressed by her apparent credentials, and he agrees to turn the case over to her to determine the outcome. Of course, he thinks she is man, but I'll just refer to her as Portia going forward. Portia tries to convince Shylock to show mercy, but Shylock demands strict adherence to the terms of the agreement. But then Portia as the presiding judge notes that the agreement requires the payment of a pound of flesh, but there is no mention of blood. So while Shylock can have his flesh, he cannot have a

single drop of Antonio's blood. Of course, Shylock cannot have flesh without blood, so the agreement is determined to be unenforceable.

Furthermore, Shylock faces the prospect of losing all of his property as a foreigner under Venetian law since he tried to take the life of a citizen. In the end, he is given mercy, and he is allowed to retain part of his property, but he has to agree to convert to Christianity. So Antonio is spared, and in the minds of Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience, the greedy money-lender got his comeuppance. This is the happy ending that Shakespeare provided for his comedy, even though modern audiences are sometimes disturbed by the outcome. Is the bullied Shylock who lost his daughter and much of his wealth really the bad guy? And is this really a comedy?

Well, it is a type of comedy. Though it blends elements of tragedy. Earlier I noted that comedies and tragedies had opposite trajectories. Comedies started with a conflict and trouble and ended with a happy resolution. Tragedies started with a period of calm or stability and ended in conflict and loss. Well, for Bassanio and Antonio, who were clearly the good guys in the play, everything ends well. So this is a comedy in that regard. But for Shylock, who was intended to be the bad guy, the play ends with loss – loss of a daughter, loss of his money, loss of his court case, and loss of his religion. So for him, this is a tragedy.

The Merchant of Venice isn't the simple straight-forward comedy that most audiences were accustomed to at the time. And that may have been part of the reason why it was so popular. The English theater was maturing and coming into its own. And writers like Shakespeare were willing to break from the rigid structure of theatrical comedy. The traditional dividing lines were starting to blur. And over the next couple of centuries, theater that focused on the spoken word would face competition from other types of theater – those that focused on singing, dancing, and the use of gestures to tell a story.

By this point in history, a form of story-telling through dance had already developed in Italy. It was a type of theater that harkened back to the earlier Roman pantomimes where performers told stories through dance and mime. Like pantomime, this new type of story-telling didn't use words. It was called ***balleto*** in Italy, but it quickly spread to France where the word was shortened to ***ballet***. The word comes from the same root that gives use the word ***ball*** as in a type of social gathering where people dance.

Italian performers not only told stories through dance. They also told stories through song. And during the late 1500s, around the current point in our overall story, Italian performers started to revisit the way the Greeks had used music in the theater, like the use of the chorus to help develop the plot. Inspired by those classical influences, the Italian performers developed new theatrical works set to music.

I called them 'works,' but in Italian the word for work is ***opus***. We sometimes use that word in English, like when we refer to someone's 'magnum opus' meaning their greatest work or achievement. And the plural form of ***opus*** was ***opera***. So in Italian, works that were set to music were called 'opera in musica.' But that term was later shortened to just the first word – ***opera***. By the way, the connection between the word ***opera*** and work is much more obvious if you think

about another word that shares the same Latin root – the word ***operate*** as when you operate a car or a piece of equipment meaning that you work with it.

Well, the first known ***opera*** was called Dafne. It was composed in the mid-1590s – around the same time that Shakespeare was composing the comedies that I discussed in this episode. That opera was first performed in 1597 and re-established the ides of storytelling through song and music.

So ballet and opera both have roots in Italy in the early modern period. And, of course, those types of storytelling though dance and music eventually found an audience in England. But it was the Italian commedia dell'arte that had the greatest impact on the English theater going forward. While Elizabethan drama incorporated some of those elements like clownish servants and females who dressed as men, the overall influence was limited. The focus remained on a story told through dialogue and words with little outside distraction.

But in the 1700s, many aspects of the commedia dell'arte were embraced as part of a new type of English performance. In some ways, this new type of performance returned to the roots of English comedy with music and dancing and less of a focus on scripted dialogues. But it also adopted many aspects of Italian comedy with improvisation, audience interaction, cross-dressing, fancy costumes, and topical jokes. Initially, the focus was more on dancing with relatively little dialogue, so they came to be known as ***pantomimes*** referring back to the old Roman type of storytelling through dance and gestures. But over time, the verbal element expanded – and much like those old Christmas gambols that Christopher Sly referenced in The Taming of the Shrew, these types of performances became common around Christmastime and the holidays. Of course, those of you listening in the UK will know exactly what I'm talking about since pantomimes are still a common part of English culture to this day. But in the US, they never had the same kind of impact. Of course, the US has a separate tradition of musical theater, but it lacks the improvisational and interactive nature of the English pantomime.

The bottom line is that there have always been many different ways to tell a story and many different ways to make people laugh. Performers have always used song and dance and gestures to entertain people. But the idea that performers would entertain audiences primarily with words through the delivery of scripted dialogue with the use of puns, malapropisms, repetition, alliteration, rhyming and other types of word play – that was a fundamental feature of the Elizabethan theater. It was a feature that distinguished that type of drama from those other forms of entertainment. And it something that was zealously guarded by playwrights like Shakespeare. And it's part of the reason of why those plays have had such a long-lasting impact on the English language.

Next time, we'll move the story forward, but we'll stay in Italy, at least for the setting of one of Shakespeare's most famous plays. We'll look at Romeo and Juliet, and we'll see what the play has to tell us about the state of English at the time. Of course, we'll look at some common words and phrases that have survived from the play, but we'll also examine what the passages have to tell us about the pronunciation and grammar of the language as well. And if all goes well, I may actually take the narrative to very end of the 1500s.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.