

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Much Ado About Nothing, Pericles, Antony and Cleopatra, and Head over Heels,*  
presented by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, February-November 2015.**

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*Much Ado About Nothing.* Director: Lileana Blain-Cruz. With Danforth Comins (Benedick), Christiana Clark (Beatrice), and Rex Young (Dogberry).

*Pericles.* Director: Joseph Haj. With Wayne T. Carr (Pericles) and Jennie Greenberry (Marina).

*Antony and Cleopatra.* Director: Bill Rauch. With Derrick Lee Weeden (Antony), Miriam Laube (Cleopatra), and Jeffrey King (Enobarbus).

*Head over Heels.* Written by Jeff Whitty. Based on *Arcadia* by Sir Philip Sidney. Music and lyrics: The Go-Go's. Director: Ed Sylvanus Iskandar. With Michael Sharon (Basilius), Miriam Laube (Gynecia), and Bonnie Milligan (Pamela).

This season, only three of the eleven Oregon Shakespeare Festival productions were of Shakespeare plays: one in each theatre. This was an unusually small number, especially since this season marked the beginning of a pledge to stage the entire canon in a decade (in contrast, the 2016 season promises five Shakespeare plays). However, the company did include one other production of interest to early modernists: a musical adaptation of tales from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*.

There were other causes for regret this season. Several performances at the outdoor theatre had to be cancelled: one in July because of a flash flood, and a number later in the summer because of smoke drifting in from nearby forest fires. Even more sadly, just before the season ended, Catherine E. Coulson died. She was in her twenty-second season at the Festival, although she was probably better known for her role as the Log Lady in

*Twin Peaks*. She had acted in many Shakespearean productions in her years at OSF, including *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Richard II*. She will be greatly missed.

### ***Much Ado About Nothing***

This was the first staging of *Much Ado About Nothing* at OSF since the outdoor production in 2009 (a production that I reviewed for *EMLS*).<sup>1</sup> Since that time we have had Joss Whedon's 2012 black-and-white film version, and, more recently, the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of the play under the title *Love's Labour's Won*. I found this OSF production inventive and ingenious, and also very thought-provoking.

The play was staged indoors at the Angus Bowmer Theatre. The set was quite simple: the stage was carpeted in green, with flowers suspended from the roof, and five chandeliers of different sizes. There were four entrances on each side, plus steps leading from the stage, and the actors also made use of the two vomitoria leading from the audience. For the most part, there was very little in the way of set change in this performance, except the bringing on and taking off of chairs, and this led to a very fluid and fast-paced production.

One of the issues with this play, as with Shakespeare's comedies in general, is the mixture of comedy and seriousness, and the director is thus faced with a number of decisions, not least in how treat the business of war at the beginning, how to account for the presence of the rebel Don John and how to stage the strange mock-wooing of Hero by Don Pedro in 2.1.<sup>2</sup>

This production had a contemporary setting, with the soldiers entering in full modern battle fatigues in the opening scene. Moreover, before the play began, a hooded figure in a wheelchair was placed upstage: at the end of the play, this same figure was wheeled into this same position, and, by then, we knew that this was Don John. It was clear from the Playbill that there was to be no Antonio in this production, and that we were to have a female Don John and a female Verges. What we could not know was that the actor

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<sup>1</sup> 'Much Ado About Nothing and All's Well That Ends Well, presented by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, Oregon, 4 June - 1 November 2009', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 15.2 (2010-11) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/15-2/revosf.htm>> [accessed 26 January 2016]

<sup>2</sup> Act, scene and line references refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974)

playing Don John, Regan Linton, was to be in a wheelchair. Linton's website tells us that she received a spinal cord injury from a car accident in college, and has used a wheelchair ever since.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we had a motivation for the bitterness of Don John, which is not provided in all productions. Despite Linton's gender, the character did not become Donna Joan, although she was largely addressed and referred to with female pronouns; instead, she was a wounded veteran and her bitterness was evident from the moment she pulled down some of the flowers from their garlands in 1.3. In an odd parallel, other garlands were pulled down by Beatrice in 3.1 as she made a vain attempt to hide herself from Hero and Ursula.

The principal actors were very strong indeed, although Hero and Claudio were always in danger of being overshadowed by Beatrice and Benedick, not least because the actors playing these roles were significantly shorter than their counterparts in the main plot. This gave some scenes a comic feel which may not have been entirely appropriate, although it did work well in 3.2 when Claudio, at his stag party, was dressed as Robin, wearing a 'Game Over' t-shirt. There was a similar disparity in height between Dogberry and Verges (a son and his mother in this production), but this worked very well and was made even funnier by having a very tall George Seacoal positioned next to the diminutive Verges.

The language of the play was spoken with clarity by almost all the cast, and the text was followed faithfully for the most part. Ducats stayed as ducats, and references to beards stayed in, even though only Leonato was actually bearded (so that the reference in 3.2 to Benedick having been shaved made little sense). The pun on civil/Seville in 2.1 was preserved, although the pun on 'savage bull' and 'sensible' in the opening scene was lost, and the purist in me mourned the fact that 'Milan' in 3.4 was pronounced with the accent on the second syllable. The disparaging use of 'Jew' at the end of 2.3 was replaced by 'fool', as it was in the Whedon film, and Benedick's reference in the next sentence to getting Beatrice's picture was accompanied by his holding up a cell phone. The mock-wooing of Hero by Don Pedro in 1.4 was cut, as was some of the word-play by the watch, including the confusion over 'deformed' in 3.3.

My own epiphany came in 3.4 when this exchange between Beatrice and Margaret finally made sense to me:

*Marg.* O illegitimate construction! I scorn that with my heels.

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<sup>3</sup> 'About Regs', *Regan Linton ... Actor* <<http://www.reganlinton.com/about-ba/>> [accessed 26 January 2016]

*Beat.* 'Tis almost five a' clock, cousin; 'tis time you were ready. By my troth, I am exceeding ill. Heigh-ho!

*Marg.* For a hawk, a horse, or a husband?

*Beat.* For the letter that begins them all, H. (3.4.50-6).

After Beatrice said the last line, she promptly sneezed, so that the 'H' started 'Hatishoo'.

This was a production which took the action to the audience whenever possible, so that, when Benedick referred to 'all women' in the opening scene, he included the women in the audience. Similarly, in 2.3, having embarked on his repeated trope, 'One woman is fair, yet I am well; another is wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet -' (26-8), he looked to the audience to complete the line. Later in that same scene, he actually went into the audience as he tried to hide from his friends. And Claudio's revelation of his suspicions about Hero in 4.1 was played as much to the audience in the theatre as to his audience on the stage.

There are parallel scenes in the first half of the play in which first Benedick (in 2.3) and then Beatrice (in 3.1) hides so that each can hear what their friends have to say about the other. In this production, although there were some differences in the staging of these two scenes, more striking was how similar they were, suggesting that Benedick and Beatrice were very closely matched indeed. Benedick's hiding was the more elaborate, but both hid ineptly behind chairs, both rolled around the floor, both ended up in front of the stage, and both had water poured over them. There was even the possibility of a third water joke in 3.3 as Oatcake and Seacoal were offstage, overhearing Conrade and Borachio just as the latter was about to urinate over them; he stopped just in time!

Benedick's overhearing scene (2.3) was in some ways similar to that in the Whedon film, as it involved him doing gym exercises, using straps and a kettle bell. This was a *tour de force* on the part of the actor, Danforth Comins, as he managed to speak his lines while doing push-ups at the same time. One consequence of the staging of this scene was that, when the other men arrived, they too were dressed for the gym, even though Leonato was using a walking stick. Verges used a stick too, and I did wonder whether this, coupled with the fact that Dogberry used a Segway, was pushing the boundaries of taste in a production where one of the actors was in a wheelchair. Nevertheless, the gym setting of this scene gave rise to some visual humour: when Beatrice arrived to summon Benedick, he went into poses to show off his muscles, and when she remarked 'You have no stomach' (255-6), he lifted his t-shirt to prove that he had a very well-developed and toned stomach indeed! In this single gesture, Benedick summed up the degree of his self-absorption: both he and Beatrice were much more concerned with themselves than with

their partner. This was a relationship largely devoid of passion, and founded on self-love. Both the principals were acting out the role of being in love, and, in that respect, this production came close to the spirit of *Love's Labour's Lost*.

The interval was taken after 3.2, following a dumbshow of the substitution of Margaret for Hero (again, mirroring a scene in the Whedon film). The second half of the production took a more serious and sinister turn after the revelations by Claudio in 4.1, especially at the moment when Leonato said of Hero 'Let her die' (154). At this moment, the garlands fell from the roof, exposing the bars from which they had been hanging in the flies. The audience could now see that there had been five sets of garlands on five bars – two straight bars upstage and three curved bars downstage. The lighting was also changed in this instant to white, and the stage remained stark for the remainder of the play, the garlands either having been removed or piled in the corner. However, the downstage area was washed in an amber light, which initially made the fallen flowers look dead and then, when they had been moved, cast a pall on the stage. This startling change had the effect of giving Leonato's speeches in this scene the tone of *King Lear*, all the more so given that the actor playing Leonato, Jack Willis, had played Lear in 2013. However, it also had the effect of taking the sting out of Beatrice's demand to Benedick that he must 'Kill Claudio': I might have been tempted to hold back the falling of the flowers until that line. At the performance I attended, the only reaction to this shocking request was laughter: either the audience was so well-versed in the play that they knew the line was coming, or else it was not delivered with sufficient intensity.

In the final scene, the hoods which the women wore to the wedding were reminiscent of the horned masks which the men had worn in 2.1, and, with the hooded Don John in her wheelchair placed upstage at the centre, I was left wondering whether we were to interpret these marriages as being equivalent to a sentence of death for the women: after all, Claudio comes within a whisker of marrying Beatrice and not Hero. It was certainly the case that the play closed with Hero and Claudio on opposite sides of the stage. Perhaps the RSC was right to link *Much Ado* with *Love's Labour's Lost* after all, and indeed with other Shakespeare comedies which do not end with unalloyed joy.

### *Pericles*

This production was the first time that *Pericles* had been staged at the OSF in the twenty-first century. I myself have not seen a production of the play staged since I directed an outdoor performance in England some 25 years ago. On that basis, I am not likely to see another production, and for many in the audience, this may be the production of *Pericles*

which they come to regard as definitive: it was a pity that some members of the audience on the night I saw this production did not treat what they were seeing with the respect it deserved.

This production was staged in the Thomas Theatre, the smallest of the three OSF theatres, which gave an intimate feel to the event. The audience was seated on three sides of the space, and the action took place, for the most part, in the centre of the auditorium. There were entrances on each of the four diagonals, including a staircase on downstage left diagonal. The floor area had overlapping horizontal panels laid upon it, which allowed for different levels of activity, as well as furnishing places in which the actors could sit. There was also a trapdoor set into the floor, and a platform which could be raised up from the floor when ropes were let down and attached to its corners.

My principal reservation about this set was that it included bits of fake rock attached to the ceiling, which seemed to serve no purpose; I acknowledge that this is a minor concern. The set's principal advantage was that its flexibility allowed for considerable economy in the presentation of the play. Similarly, the actors and musicians wore simple costumes with a Middle-Eastern feel: loose trousers and tunics or flowing dresses.

From the very beginning, two distinctive features of this production were immediately obvious: the use of projection and the use of music. The wall that was not used for audience seating became a cyclorama for projection, which began from the very first moment of the play as stars filled the theatre, an effect which was repeated at the beginning of the second half. Other notable uses of projections came in the scenes at sea: in the first of these (2.1), the sea was represented by a billowing silk sheet speared across the stage, and a 'swimming' Pericles appeared through a slit in this sheet.

There was live music aplenty, with musicians onstage, sometimes putting down their instruments to join the cast as actors. The fluency of this shifting of roles helped to underscore the non-realistic feel of this staging, and that was compounded by the doubling of roles: almost all the principal actors played at least two parts. In a play with little or no character development (even Pericles really just gets older), this gave the cast an opportunity to show their range, and they did this by affecting different accents and vocal styles as they shifted roles. The director, Joseph Haj, explained in an introductory video to the play<sup>4</sup> that he especially wanted this doubling to involve contrasting characters, and so, for example, the same actor played the wicked daughter of Antiochus and the good

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<sup>4</sup> 'Director Notes: A Sophisticated, Spiritual Play... with Pirates', *Oregon Shakespeare Festival* < <https://www.osfashland.org/en/productions/2015-plays/pericles.aspx> > [accessed 26 January 2016]

daughter, Marina, and the same actor played Antiochus and Simonides. The role of the female Bawd in Act 4 was played by a man, which gave an extra resonance to the question 'Are you a woman?' (4.2.82), and also necessitated a very quick change between 4.6 and 5.1 for the same actor to resume the role of Helicanus. In all, this excellent cast of thirteen played thirty-three roles.

The cast also sang (beginning with Gower's Prologue), and the lyrics and music were specially composed for this production by Jack Herrick. One example of these songs was particularly noteworthy and witty: in Act 4, the Bawd sang a love song, accompanied by the Pander and Boulton, which included these lines (from Sonnet 154):

This brand she quenched in a cool well by,  
Which from Love's fire took heat perpetual  
Growing a bath and healthful remedy ...

The Bawd pronounced the word 'remedy' with its modern pronunciation, thus destroying the rhyme with 'by', but Pandar and Boulton, in singing their echo, restored the original, Jacobean rhyme.

Since this is not a play which would have been familiar to many member of the audience, the director had considerable latitude in staging, and made a number of distinctive and successful choices. In the opening scene, for example, the wickedness of Antiochus and the decadence of his court were indicated with great economy: firstly, by having the riddle which Pericles was set to solve written on the daughter's naked back (hidden from the audience until she turned); secondly, by having Antiochus kill the messenger who brought the news that Pericles had fled. To preserve continuity in the complex narrative, the armour found by the fishermen in 2.1 was simplified to be a shield which had been brought on by Helicanus in 1.2.

In terms of staging, the trapdoor came into play in 2.3, as the feast was brought in, and again in 3.1 to take Thaisa and her lady to a lower level during the storm at sea. In that same scene, Pericles was perched on a swaying platform, which was to become his pavilion in 5.1 and to be used again in the final scene for the elevation of Diana. After the intermission (which came at the end of 3.4.), the trapdoor was used to bring up the tomb of Lychorida in 4.1, on the lid of which was a projection of her name, and the same was used for the grave of Marina in 4.4. The trapdoor also brought up the bed in brothel in 4.6 for the non-seduction by Lysimachus.

I noticed few textual changes (apart from the songs): ‘wench’ was changed to ‘maid’, in the Prologue to Act 4 for instance, and ‘lays’ to ‘airs’ in the Prologue to Act 5. I did wonder about the word ‘flap-jacks’ (2.1.82-3), but discovered that this is the only occurrence of this word in Shakespeare, and that it is a term, like ‘homely’, which has retained a meaning in US usage which reflects Elizabethan/Jacobean usage but has been lost in the contemporary variety of British English.

All in all, I thought that this was a very successful production of a play which is not seen often enough.

### ***Antony and Cleopatra***

*Antony and Cleopatra* was the only outdoor production of a Shakespeare play this season, and there was much to admire, including outstanding performances from Miriam Laube and from Derrick Lee Weeden.

The set was deceptively simple: there was a triangle across the tiring house facade, and another across the thrust stage. When darkness fell, the arms of these triangles were illuminated (most frequently in gold, but sometimes in shades of dappled green), and so became a pyramid: perhaps the intention was also to represent a live triangle, but that was less clear. As the play moved to its conclusion, Roman standards dominated every area of the space, flanking the columns which had framed the stage from the beginning.

On only one occasion was there any use of video projection, and that was for a rain effect in Rome in 3.2. However, in this play with so many different scenes, the production made substantial use of surtitles between scenes to inform the audience of the location of the next part of the action. The production made full use of the theatre space, including the vomitoria (e.g. for the arrival of Octavius in 3.6) and even one of the exits for the departure of Enobarbus in 4.6. A ship’s wheel was brought on to the upper level in 2.1, which was set at sea, rather than at Pompey’s house, and the Soothsayer appeared on this level in the next scene. By far the most lavish use of this area came just before the intermission, in 3.6, when Octavius’s description of the enthronement of Antony and Cleopatra was accompanied by its realisation on this upper level. This was a sumptuous visual treat, and, fortunately, not a ploy which was used earlier to accompany the best known descriptive passage in the play – that by Enobarbus in 2.2.

There were two distinct sets of costumes in the play. The Egyptian characters wore beautiful flowing robes, but the Romans wore either armour or battle fatigues, and, as the



play wore on, a drab military regime took the place of a rich and cultivated civilisation.

This was a version of the play which, in contrast to *Much Ado*, was exuberant in its celebration of the physical passion of the two lovers, and which, indeed, opened with them in bed together, unashamedly making love in full view of the court. The text has only one short scene in which they are out of the public gaze (4.12 – by which point Cleopatra has become a ‘foul Egyptian’), but the presence of an onstage audience was no hindrance to their exhibition of infatuation. Antony donned one of Cleopatra’s wigs in 1.2, and Cleopatra’s reception of the messenger in 2.5 and 3.3 went from the hysterical to the comic, but always with one eye on the reaction of her followers. One innovative feature of this production was to have one of the pair of lovers walk silently onstage during a scene in which the other was speaking, suggesting that each was constantly in the thoughts of the other: thus, Antony walked on in 2.5, and Cleopatra in 2.7 (as Antony was describing a crocodile) and in 3.4. Ironically, the private scene between Antony and Octavia (3.4) provided a moment of true tenderness in a production which tended to emphasise high drama: there were moments when Weeden’s Antony could well have been Othello.

For me, the outstanding actor was Jeffrey King, who was simply brilliant as Enobarbus. His physical presence drew the eyes of the audience to him whenever he was on stage, and his diction, like that of Derrick Lee Weeden, was flawless, but I confess that I still had some problem in hearing all the words from all of the actors, despite (or perhaps because of) the use of microphones. This was especially unfortunate in this play, which includes so many unusual words and usages: I caught ‘lank’d’, ‘palter’, ‘yare’, ‘yarely’, ‘ribaudred’, ‘boggler’ and ‘clip your wives’, but I could not attest to the presence of other gems such as ‘meered’, ‘muss’, ‘lictors’ or ‘he words me’. I was pleased, however, that in 3.6 ‘revenue’ was pronounced properly, with emphasis on the second syllable.

This play is listed in the First Folio as a tragedy, but this production pointed up its humourous moments, sometimes in ways which were not entirely justifiable or successful. There was a clever joke in 1.2 about Iras wanting an extra inch but not in her husband’s nose, and a telling pause as Enobarbus described Cleopatra as a ‘wonderful piece of... work’, but I thought the laughs at the expense of Mardian, the effeminate Eunuch were cheap and unnecessary, all the more so when he was given the role of ambassador to Octavius in 3.12. The decision to have Enobarbus pronounce Menas as ‘mean ass’ (from 2.6 onwards) was probably allowable, and comparable with ‘Been-a-dick’ in the *Much Ado*: but I doubt that either selection found much favour with teachers bringing student groups to the productions. I had other reservations about the humour towards the end of the play: Shakespeare gives comic lines to the Clown who delivers the

‘worm’ in 5.2, but, in this production, the Clown also had a funny walk and a comic tune. This followed closely after Antony's question ‘Dead then?’ (4.14.34), which also prompted laughter.

Whilst this production eliminated several minor roles – Euphronius, Gallus, Menecrates, Philo, Seleucus, Silius, Taurus and Thyreus – it interpolated Cleopatra’s children, Caesarion and the twin babies fathered by Antony. After a few lines of 2.5, Cleopatra stood to reveal herself as heavily pregnant. Charmian patted Cleopatra’s belly as she advised her to ‘keep yourself within yourself’, and Cleopatra brought on her twin babies in 3.3.

Despite the fact that the reign of Octavius (in his new name of Caesar Augustus) was regarded as the Golden Age of ‘universal peace’ (and is so described in 4.6), this production ended with the sound of the killing off-stage of Cleopatra's children, and thus with Octavius carrying out his threat, that, unless she acceded to his demands, he would:

put your children  
To that destruction which I’ll guard them from  
If thereon you rely. (5.2.131-3)

Overall, although this was a production which was visually spectacular at times, its very scale and size meant that the personal qualities of the tragedy were in danger of being dwarfed by pageantry.

### ***Head Over Heels***

I had known that OSF was planning a production based on Sidney’s *Arcadia*, and I had assumed that it might focus on the episode that Shakespeare used for the Gloucester subplot in *King Lear*. I could not have been more wrong, and in many other respects, this production proved to be a delightful surprise. The script, by Jeff Whitty of *Avenue Q* fame, incorporated elements of the story of Basilius and his family and added over twenty songs, very much in the way in which Bob Carlton added songs to *The Tempest* to create *Return to the Forbidden Planet* in the 1980s. The difference here was that all the songs in this show came from one single source: the back catalogue of The Go-Go’s. Since I had little experience of the work of this group, the entire production was a total surprise. Although The Go-Go’s did not perform the music themselves, they were in the audience on the opening night, and took a bow at the curtain call.

The production opened just as the law in the USA changed to allow marriage for gay couples in every state of the union, and a Rainbow flag was hoisted at the beginning of each performance in the open-air Allen Pavilion. Sidney's narrative was changed to include a gay relationship between Pamela and Mopsa, which went far beyond even the confusion of cross dressing which is there in Sidney's text (and, of course, in many a Shakespeare play).

The words of the text were not drawn from Sidney (but Bob Carlton didn't use Shakespeare either), and some odd decisions were made. The character of Philanax was transformed from the trusty adviser of *Arcadia* into a mincing homosexual – very similar to the way in which Mardian, the Eunuch, was treated in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In a production celebrating sexual equality, this seemed a very strange choice.

Moreover, as Pamela came to realise her own sexuality, she transmitted this awakening to the audience through a series of crude rhymes about parts of the female body. Bonnie Milligan was making her OSF debut in this role, and hers was the standout performance. However, I was probably not alone in regretting that she was brought in almost solely for this one show (she also had a minor role as a singer in *The Count of Monte Cristo*). It is always a shame to see the company departing from its basis as a true repertory company.

The performances by the cast and the musicians were all very strong, and I look forward to seeing this play staged more widely. For the most part, this was a magical, exuberant and enchanting piece of theatre, if a little too long: the business with the comic undertakers towards the end of the show could well have been cut (although their satiric comments on critics were well-made).

## ***Conclusion***

This was not the best season of Shakespeare productions which I have seen at OSF. Neither *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Much Ado About Nothing* had the fire and passion which these plays usually carry. *Pericles*, in contrast, was magnificent and moving, and it was no surprise that this production transferred at the end of the season to the Folger in Washington DC and then to the Guthrie in Minneapolis.