

The Complete Plays of Shakespeare, Condensed

by Rachel Rodman

WHY WE LIKE IT: *As if the title didn't knock our socks off, the sheer brazen pluck (or Puck?) of taking on the Big 'S' and reducing his plays to a few pages on a lit rag of questionable character blew everything else off us too. Naked, we stood amazed! The 'toil and trouble' this must have taken could only have been 'double, double'. Alas, an inspired (duh) witty conceit! (in the Elizabethan sense). Duds back on, we agreed that, apart from everything else, we loved the way the author conjured a blended dramatis personae, with Shakespeare's characters commingling with those from an extracurricular fictional genealogy. Zounds! If 'the play's the thing' this farce be it! 'And now the deed is done!' Read on! (Be sure to scroll down to the family tree that follows the author's bio.)*

Henry IV, part 1

Falstaff was fat.

Henry IV, part 2

Really Fat.

The Merry Wives of Windsor

He was fat, in fact, and the fairies of Windsor, perched in the treetops, concurred. So they winged down angrily in order to pinch and burn him.

Henry V

Until he died.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

To celebrate, the fairies distilled a purple intoxicant, sourced from a rare flower. Under its influence, they engaged in a raucous orgy, using Falstaff's soft belly as a pillow.

"He's so fat!" they moaned. "So fat!"

As You Like It

In the happy melee of it, Puck--ever the cheeky one--sidled up to King Oberon and revealed: "I am a woman."

Two Gentlemen of Verona

"A real woman," he--now she--clarified, and loosened the ties of her bodice.

Twelfth Night

Until her breasts were prominent and obvious and free. "You are a woman," Oberon agreed.

Henry VIII

So he called upon all his holy men, including Cardinal Wolsey, to engineer a breach with Rome, and annul his marriage to Queen Titania.

Antony and Cleopatra

Oberon and Puck shared an appetite for violent conjugal play. By the end of their honeymoon, their breasts were scabbed with sword wounds and fang marks--the marks of their ardor.

But, outside their bedchamber, the rage of Rome burned too, and the two remaining pillars of the world, Pope Anachronism IX and Octavius Caesar, combined their forces, vowing to annihilate Oberon, the Heretic, and Puck, his whore. And, of course: to take Windsor.

Cymbeline

So a vast army advanced from Rome to England.

Henry VI, part 1

As Oberon donned his war gear, his trusted adviser, Joan of Arc, assured him,

Macbeth

“No man of woman born can defeat you.”

But Caesar, who had enjoyed an eponymous birth, without any vaginas at all, cried, “I can! I can!” and smote Oberon through the heart, excited to prove it.

The Tempest

Puck fled, aided by the sea god, Setebos. And soon, on a distant island, she gave birth to a misshapen burden: a boy, whom she named Caliban.

The Comedy of Errors

And, moments later, to a second, ostensibly identical boy, whom she named Caliban #2.

The Merchant of Venice

Under Caesar's rule, Windsor entered a golden age of trade, profiting from the export of Falstaff's belly fat. To prepare the flesh, Windsor's merchants sliced it into exactly equal portions, defined by law: one pound apiece.

Hamlet

To secure the new political order, Caesar took the jilted queen, Titania, to his bed.

But Titania's son, Hamlet, took exception to the marriage. Moody and morose, he came to spend an inordinate amount of time in Windsor's charnel yard, brooding over Falstaff's skull.

"What a piece of work is this fat, fat man?" he wondered, sighing lugubriously.

Othello

Windsor's witch, Joan of Arc, spoke privately to Caesar:

"You, my lord, were not born of woman. And, when it comes to your woman, you should be usurped by no other man."

She whispered this shrewdly and well, directly into Caesar's ear, until Caesar took the suggestion, just as Joan wished him to, and then he throttled Titania.

The Winter's Tale

As Titania died, a baby, Perdita, exited her womb--the true seed of Caesar. But Caesar, certain of the girl's illegitimacy, ordered her to be cast into the sea.

Julius Caesar

"No man of woman born can defeat you," Joan prophesied, just before stabbing Caesar.

"Et tu?" Caesar gurgled.

And Caesar fell.

King John

To consolidate her power, Joan hired an assassin, Hubert, to eliminate Hamlet.

Pericles

But Hamlet absconded, hiding himself behind a pallet of Falstaff's belly flesh, inside the hold of one of the merchant ships.

Weeks later, at sea, the vessel encountered a terrible storm. The crew was lost, the ship was wrecked, and Hamlet was cast onto a strange shore, the sole survivor.

“What country is this?” he asked.

Troilus and Cressida

“Troy,” answered Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek army.

Timon of Athens

With the Greeks, Hamlet shared the wealth of the wrecked ship. For many days, they caroused on Windsor wine and engaged in a vigorous orgy, assisted by Windsor’s aphrodisiacal potions.

After a fortnight, convinced of their love, Hamlet requested their help.

“My friends,” he said, “I must kill Joan of Arc.”

But the Greeks simply laughed and cried, “More wine!” and “More penis!” and otherwise refused to assist him.,

So Hamlet, enraged, stormed away, dragging the remaining pallets of Falstaff’s flesh behind him. To the Trojans, he revealed the position of the Greeks’ camp, and directed the construction of a new war-machine: the catapult.

Then, together, they set the ultra-flammable pallets of Falstaff's belly fat alight, and shot them over the walls, so that the entire Greek army went up in flames--every man destroyed.

At the spectacle of it, Hamlet laughed and laughed, maniacally. "Hawk from a handsaw!" he chortled, like a man unhinged. And: "Methinks it is a weasel!"

Two Noble Kinsmen

On Puck's distant island, in the meantime, the Caliban twins had grown up together, the closest of friends.

But that closeness ended one morning when a weatherbeaten raft scraped onto the sand and a beautiful woman stepped ashore.

It was Perdita, the foundling, whom creatures of the sea had nurtured to adulthood, entranced by her great loveliness.

"Choose me!" both Calibans cried in chorus, throwing themselves at her feet.

But Perdita, squinting, protested: "I can't even physically distinguish you."

So the twins set up an elaborate jousting ring, and called all the fairies of the island and sea, together with the entire Greek pantheon, to

witness their battle. Again and again they clashed, with desperate rage, so that, with each collision, lance to lance, the whole world shuddered.

Finally, Caliban #1, benefiting from the stumble of #2's charger, threw his brother to the ground and cried: "Perdita is mine!"

"Whatever," said Perdita, shrugging.

Richard III

Back to Windsor, Hamlet sailed, leading a contingent of Trojans. At the shore, Joan's army met them, and a grand battle ensued.

Mid-conflict, Joan was thrown from her horse. Sustaining a head injury, she began to babble distracted nonsense, like: "No man is a horse!" and "My kingdom for a horse of woman born!" until, with a triumphant cry, Hamlet disemboweled her.

Hamlet ascended the throne. His Trojan queen, Cressida, accompanied him. In the joy of it, the war-weary nation staged a celebratory orgy, from the happy stupor of which it would not rouse for many weeks.

"Nymph!" cried Hamlet, entangled with his queen. "In thy orifices have all my sins been committed!"

Richard II

“Curse you!” cried Caliban #2, made sick by #1’s happiness. And he built a boat and sailed away, accompanied by a heavily-armed contingent of island and sea fairies.

If he could not have Perdita, he was determined, at least, to claim his birthright.

The Windsorites, still mid-orgy, mounted little resistance. So Caliban’s forces handily assassinated Hamlet, who died gurgling querulous protests like “The undiscover’d orifice?” and “Quintessence of penis?”

After the regicide, the assassins forcefully disentangled Queen Cressida, mid-copulation, from her dead husband, then escorted her weeping back to Troy.

Love’s Labour’s Lost

On the throne of Windsor, Caliban #2 still dreamed bitterly of Perdita. So he established a sex-less court, devoted to study and serious contemplation--no females allowed.

One evening, lifting his eyes from his book, Caliban noticed one of his fairy servants, standing uncomfortably close. It was a servant that Caliban had never, until that moment, looked at very carefully before, and was now uncertain how to classify.

“Are you a male or a female, Ariel?” he asked sternly.

“Does it matter, my lord?” Ariel whispered.

And Caliban’s voice caught, and his heart hammered, and he decided: no, it did not matter.

Measure for Measure

But in the morning, damp with sex, Caliban #2 remembered his vow. “Get out!” he cried, driving Ariel away.

Afterwards, in his anguish, Caliban decided that it had not been enough--not nearly enough--to banish sex only from his court. To safeguard Perdita’s memory, he must banish sex from the entire nation.

So he called upon his father’s old supporter, Cardinal Wolsey. Together, they legislated the closure of all the bawdy houses, the execution of all of the adulterers and lechers and whores, and the destruction of Windsor’s aphrodisiacal potions.

But it didn’t help; nothing helped. It didn’t matter how many draconian laws he drafted, or how many disgusting philanderers he destroyed. Ariel’s memory remained with Caliban, all the same--Ariel’s eyes, Ariel’s lips, Ariel’s genitals, and Ariel’s love--as visceral and immediate as his own heart, and he could not root it out.

Henry VI, part 2

For many years, Hubert, the assassin, had fruitlessly scoured the seas. Now, returning home, he discovered that his target, Hamlet, was already dead, and that his old commander, Joan of Arc, was too.

On top of that: all of Windsor's bawdy houses were closed.

It was too much. So he fomented a revolution.

Combing the countryside, Hubert and his rag-tag band of supporters seized and beheaded all of the constables and prison wardens, then set the bodies on fire.

With particular relish, they decapitated Cardinal Wolsey, then threw his flaming head into the charnel yard, where Falstaff's flesh was prepared for export.

Fire met fat. In the resulting explosion, gobs of Falstaff's burning body were flung across the whole of Windsor, bright and deadly, like rain from Hell.

Coriolanus

In the sting of Caliban #2's rejection, everything became twisted in Ariel's heart. Loyalty into betrayal; love into hate.

So the jilted fairy made an impulsive journey to Rome.

"Crush Windsor!" the heartsick Ariel implored the pope. "And kill King Caliban!"

Romeo and Juliet

The sea god Setebos, who had been long absent, returned to Puck in a dream, and revealed to her the awful secret of Perdita's parentage.

"No!" Puck cried, beating her breasts.

"Seed of Caesar!" she spat, pulling Perdita from her son's bed.

"Murderer's daughter!" Then, with a long sword--the very sword that she had used, years ago, to lovingly wound her husband during their honeymoon--she stabbed Perdita in the back, up to the hilt.

"No!" cried Caliban #1. Energetic in his anguish, he clutched his beloved tight, impaling himself on the same blade, where it protruded from Perdita's belly.

The Taming of the Shrew

Under the cover of night, Setebos slithered quietly into the couple's tomb.

"I have come to this island to wive it wealthily," he reported. "And be she unwilling, or previously married--or dead--I will still have her."

Then, with shake, he disentangled Perdita--heiress of Windsor--from the limp grasp of her Caliban.

"You are so bright, my Perdita," he said, caressing her grey, shriveled flesh.

“And your breath is so sweet,” he said, kissing her mold-speckled mouth.

Then, whispering additional compliments, he dragged her down with him, down, down, down, to his lair at the bottom the sea.

King Lear

Behind them, Perdita and Caliban #1 left three young daughters. In her grief, Puck, their grandmother, devoted herself entirely to their care.

Each girl had been christened with a distinct name. But Puck found these bothersome to remember, and not at all in accordance with her own ordinal-based child-naming philosophy, and so she preferred to call them Goneril #1, #2, and #3.

Within a few years, the older two had had enough of the tiny island, and were determined to claim their royal birthright.

“I loved you more than space,” yawned Goneril #1. “I love you so much I wish I was dead,” snorted Goneril #2. Then they sailed away.

After the girls’ departure, Puck and Goneril #3 became mortally sick with heartache. Before they died, however, they had the foresight to arrange themselves, with impeccable blocking, about the corpse of Caliban #1: stage left and stage right, respectively, to his stage center; three generations in one tomb.

Henry VI, part 3

Once they'd disembarked at Windsor, Goneril #1 and #2 looked cunningly at one another. Then, with a primal scream, each of them simultaneously sliced off the other's head, speared it onto a pole, and planted it in the earth. "I am the Queen of Windsor!" both cried.

For a few moments, their lips continued to move, suspended on their quivering poles. But then they both died.

Titus Andronicus

After decades alone with his corpse bride, Setebos emerged from the ocean. During those years, he had thoroughly tamed Perdita, tamed her down to the bone, and now he was excited to show her off: well-mannered, demure, and fleshless.

But Windsor was in the middle of a civil war, and no one seemed in the least interested in Perdita's shows of obedience.

Later, in the charnel yard, Setebos made an even more upsetting discovery. In place of the rich dowry that he had expected to claim, as Perdita's husband, he found only a charred pit. Following the attack by Hubert's rebels, not an ounce of Falstaff's flesh remained.

So, in a rage, Setebos began slaughtering everyone, absolutely everyone, making a slow, bloody path toward Caliban's castle.

As Setebos continued his brutal spree, Queen Cressida's forces, sensing their moment, swarmed onto the shore. At their helm marched Hamlet's adolescent son and heir--a morose, bookish child, called "Poor Yorick," who had been conceived at the very moment of his father's death.

"Make way for King Yorick!" the Trojans cried.

Just a few oar strokes behind, a fleet of Romans, led by Pope Anachronism IX, also reached Windsor. Ariel, who had since had a change of heart, cried, "Stop! Stop!" attempting to impede them. But it was no use.

"Make way for the army of Christ!" the Romans shouted, shoving past the repentant fairy.

A beat later, a horde of Goths, too, attracted by the turmoil, poured opportunistically into the harbor. They ate the local children, assaulted the local women, and cut off their opponents' hands, or deviously induced them to cut off their own hands themselves.

The struggle lasted many days. But, by the end of it, everyone, everywhere--the entire population of Windsor, from the royal retinue to Hubert's rebels; Queen Cressida and Prince Yorick and the other Trojans; Pope Anachronism IX and his Roman soldiers; Setebos, the Goths, and all the miscellaneous fairies of the earth and sea--all of them, to the last soul, had perished in rage and pain.

Much Ado About Nothing

Amid the heaps of corpses, two long-sundered lovers lay close to one another: eye to eye, heart to heart. They were significantly feistier than the other Windsorites, and so took a few moments longer to die.

“Let’s get married, you irascible creature, you,” said Ariel, extending bloody stumps in place of fingers.

“Forsooth,” wheezed Caliban #2 through a punctured esophagus.

All’s Well that Ends Well

So they did.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Earlier in the decade, I read the Complete Works of Shakespeare. It was lovely, of course. Just a bit on the long side..So. I marshaled my editorial scissors, in response to the problem. And a stack of black markers. And a little LSD...Voila!*

BIO: Rachel Rodman (www.rachelrodman.com) writes fairy tales, food poetry and popular science. Her work has appeared in *Fireside Fiction*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Future Fire* and elsewhere.

Royal Family of Windsor

