

MIMUS

by Lilli Thal • translated by John Brownjohn

Genre: Fiction, novel

Themes: Class-based society
What it means to be human
A just war
Right vs wrong
Faith
Revenge
Friendship
Power
Innocence/maturity
A Jester's life
Love
Fate

Suitable for: Grades 7 – 10

Mimus

The fate of kingdoms rest in the hands of a fool ...

Prince Florin is restless. For years he has trained to fight, but now the long-waged battle with the neighboring kingdom draws to a close. Worse still, the price of peace may be his own betrothal to the princess of Vinland.

The fate that awaits him at his enemy's castle is worse than any he imagined. His father is betrayed, his people slain, and Florin himself enslaved as a pupil of the cunning jester Mimus. Florin is forced to do the cruel clown's bidding and perform for the wicked conquering king, and he faces a life of unending humiliation. But tricks and wiles are a jester's best weapons, and there might be more to Mimus than Florin imagines.

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INTRODUCTION

Florin is the 12-year-old prince of Moltovia, a medieval kingdom surrounded by other similar kingdoms in a structured and ordered world. When the story of *Mimus* opens Florin's father, King Philip, has summoned him to the neighboring kingdom of Vinland, where King Theodo has invited first King Philip and now the prince to celebrate their newly-signed peace treaty, ending years of conflict and antagonism between the two kingdoms.

But the peaceful overtures are all a ruse. On being presented to King Theodo, Florin finds that his father and all of his followers have been tortured and imprisoned. Florin, on the whim of Theodo, is apprenticed to the Vinland jester, Mimus, in what appears to be an effort to further humiliate and destroy both Florin and his father.

Florin's time with Mimus is a confusion of hunger, humiliation and abject misery, though there is friendship, growth and an eventual understanding of a hidden past and a painful desire for revenge. Hope rules for Florin as the plans of Philip's supporters and the assistance of his friends see him released and peace established.

While this is a story of basic human feelings and ideals—power, revenge, friendship and love—and deals with the very essence of what it is to be human, it is also a fast moving, entertaining and engaging read that takes the reader into a world that is both vastly different and fascinatingly similar to our own.

STRUCTURE / LANGUAGE

Mimus opens with a story within a story. Consider a writing exercise that mimics this opening style.

- When / How could such a technique be best employed?
- What does it show us of the characters and their feelings? Do the ways they respond to, interact with, or behave towards the story being told to them reveal to us who they are and what they are like?

Dialogue is also an important part of this opening scene. Another writing exercise could involve constructing a story that begins with dialogue. Set the scene and begin

to describe the characters and their motivations through the words they speak to each other.

- Discuss the use of dialogue as an attention-seeking device.
- Does it adequately capture reader interest? Why or why not?

TRANSLATION

John Brownjohn has translated *Mimus* into English from the original German. Discuss the implications of such a translation.

- What issues come into account whenever work is translated from one language into another?
- Elicit from any bilingual students examples of difficulties in a translation—words that cannot be translated, or words that change in meaning.

Many websites offer translation of text. The site <dictionary.com> states: “The translator will not produce a perfect translation. In most cases it should adequately convey a sense of the original; however, it is not a substitute for a competent human translator.”

- What must a “competent human” translator do to protect the integrity of a story?

CHAPTER HEADINGS

These are the chapter headings for *Mimus*:

- Montfield
- Across the Frontier
- Betrayed
- The Jester's Second Skin
- The Donkey Hunt
- Agony of Mind
- Pupil and Master
- The Royal Children
- Audience Day
- Kitchen and Cellar
- A Nocturnal Visitor
- The Excursion

- The Message
- The Renegades
- In the Dungeons
- Christmas
- Duel with a Giant
- The Game of Chess
- The Tavern
- Shrove Tuesday
- The Jester's Peace
- The Seal

As a group they are not particularly descriptive of the feelings or actions that are to be found in the respective chapters. Finding short, interesting chapter headings, though, can be a difficult task.

- Suggest a new name for one of the chapters, paying particular attention to the feelings and ideas you think the author is trying to convey.

WORD PLAY

Plays on words, rhymes, riddles, songs and tales are the backbone of the world of the jester. Florin displays an early skill in this area (p. 53)— “word fencing,” as they call it—with Mimus when they are first thrown together in Theodo’s court.

There are many examples throughout the text where Mimus and Florin use their power with words to entertain, confuse or convince.

- Gravestone inscriptions (p. 66)
- Learning riddles (p. 71)
- Rhyming words (p. 80)
- Florin's song about King Theodo (p. 97)
- “food of poetry” (p. 136)
- Mimus ridicules the court poet (p. 139)
- Entertaining Theodo with song (p. 162)
- An extempore poem for Alix (p. 203)
- The puzzle of the thread and beads (p. 212)

- Mimus insults the Moltovian visitors in song (p. 233)
- Florin sings for the torturer, Antonius (p. 244)
- Florin and Mimus trade insulting words to describe Theodo (p. 280)
- Mimus's "execution ditties" (p. 309)
- Mimus answers Florin in song—Philip is to die (p. 346)
- Mimus sings to Philip at his execution (p. 364)
- Theodo sings the songs he made Philip sing (p. 380)

On many occasions it is the power of song that diffuses a situation or cuts through the lies and hesitations to the truth.

•Why?

Great fun could be had replicating the insulting forms of poetry and song that the jesters excel at, though the target will need to be chosen carefully.

DESCRIPTIVE PASSAGES

Mimus contains moments that explore the darkest and most heartfelt emotions of the human soul. The following three pieces of text describe Florin during times of deep fear and despair. Thal uses simile to great effect.

Discuss this device and attempt to create new similes to describe either Florin's feelings, as in the following examples, or choose to write about his happier moments of hope and joy.

"the darkness smote him in the face like a giant spider's web. It plastered itself over his eyes, infiltrated his nose and mouth. Blinded and gasping for breath, he staggered backward." (p. 168)

"There seemed to be a point beyond which the human spirit simply rejects an overabundance of misfortune, just as the surface of a frozen pond refuses to absorb a shower of rain ... the knowledge failed to break his heart, which was protected by a thick layer of ice." (p. 242)

"Fear throbbed in his veins like a flurry of short, sharp drumbeats." (p. 295)

"shocks of corn were arranged in rows like little hunchbacked dwarves." (p. 29) 6

ARTISTIC RESPONSE

With wonderfully described medieval kingdoms and interconnected relationships between many of the nobility, this book would lend itself to being graphically represented or illustrated.

Consider creating:

- A family tree of each royal house
- A map showing each of the kingdoms, its castle and surrounds
- A chart with Florin at the center showing each of the characters he encounters and their relationship to him and each other
- A coat of arms for one of the royal houses (Vinland–lion, Moltovia–wolf)

CHARACTERS

FLORIN

When *Mimus* opens Florin has only recently turned 12 years old. The story that unfolds is an enormous burden for a boy so young. This shows the extent of Florin's intelligence and courage. Despite his skills, the text is the story of Florin's growth as a person. (see Themes–innocence and maturity)

To facilitate Florin's growth it seems that his prince-like characteristics must be pared away.

He is stripped of his clothes—the trappings of another life—then chained to the wall (p. 61). His “new existence ... cruel and relentless” (p. 98), “He missed simply everything and everyone” (p. 100).

- Can such humiliation and deprivation really change the boy within?

On audience day in Theodo's court (p. 141), Florin is now at the foot of the throne rather than upon it. He plays the same game, though now with shoes rather than hats.

After Florin is whipped, he feels ashamed that he winced and whimpered; he felt that he should have been stronger for his father (p. 166).

- Is Florin being realistic here, casting himself as the noble hero, forever brave?

Importantly, Philip tells Florin to “never forget who you are” (p. 244) and advises him to hide behind buffoonery to facilitate his survival. As his time as a jester continues, remaining true to his own identity becomes increasingly difficult.

- Is it the worst fate of all to have your true self taken away from you?

Florin starts to recall his own past as if it were the “recollections of a stranger” (p. 287). He is afraid he is losing his own identity.

“... keeping him among the insane until he himself lost his reason. It was like condemning a healthy person to live among lepers until he inevitably became a leper himself.” (p. 288)

It is at this point that he takes comfort from Brother the wolf—a symbol of his homeland and a fellow isolate with little hope of escape.

Florin's hope wavers:

“Gone was the spirit of initiative that had swept him along and engineered the meeting with his father. His hopes had congealed in the cold. They had withered like the rose-bushes he could see from the roof, which resembled fleshless skeletons. Late roses had still been blooming in the castle garden on the day he launched his parchment dart. When had that been, a thousand years ago?” (p. 271)

At one point Florin marvels that the world has been going on outside as normal: “He alone had been buried alive in a stone tomb” (p. 322).

He continually moves between “agonizing fear and breathless hope” (p. 353).

Florin displays a strong will to survive (p 299).

- Do you think Florin is brave?

MIMUS

Why is the book called *Mimus* when Florin is the main character?

Mimus is a word meaning a genus of the family *mimidacea* or mockingbirds.

- What do you think is the significance of this?

The first description of Mimus in the text:

“Florin was at first unsure if it was human, the stooped creature that stood there sniffing the air in all directions. It had the face of a man, but its head was surmounted by long ass's ears and its body was sheathed from head to foot in an iridescent skin striped green and yellow, like that of a frog. Every movement it made was accompanied by the tinkling of bells, a sound so shrill it hurt the ears.” (p. 48)

- Does this description sit well with the complex character we discover Mimus to be?
- Why does he appear so? Is it how he wishes to be seen or how others wish to see him?

When Florin is given to Mimus (p. 57) as his apprentice, Mimus gives a look of “sudden alarm” (p. 57) that is quickly disguised. Why?

Mimus is unrecognizable out of his jester's outfit (p 63). Florin sees him as no more than “a common or garden servant.”

The bells of his costume are like a brand (p. 67).

Mimus is transformed by his costume; Florin spellbound (p. 68).

- Does his jester's regalia make him special?
- Is this the way he would prefer to be seen?
- Is Florin's father deceived in his summation of Mimus out of jester's clothing?

Mimus justifies his actions by claiming everything he does is “to amuse King Theodo. That's my purpose in life” (p. 66). For him, life is a game but everyone must “play by King Theodo's rules”(p. 67).

Mimus talks of his early life (p. 124): sold by his mother, abandoned and alone, he has even forgotten his real name (p. 126) (or claims to have), a thought that horrifies Florin.

- Should we pity Mimus?

Florin discovers that Mimus spends his afternoons tormenting his father in the dungeons at Theodo's direction (p. 255).

Mimus is a complex character not easily understood.

- Can you understand his actions?
- How can he reconcile what appears to be affection for Florin (see Theme–Friendship) with his treatment of Philip? Can the two be separated?

Mimus says, when challenged over his treatment of Philip: “what ought I do ... refuse to obey and die a hero’s death?” (p. 266)

When Florin tells Benzo of this, he appears to understand Mimus’s view (p. 267).

- Is it only the wealthy that can afford morals?

The complex essence of Mimus is described by Florin as he attempts to come to terms with him:

“As on the chessboard, so in reality, Mimus would doubtless be black and white at one and the same time, a cross between a lion and a wolf. But how could one play with a chessman that might change sides from one move the next?” (p. 314)

At one point the jester does lose his composure (p. 352). He says his clothes are not a jester’s motley but:

“‘dragon scales, layer after layer of them grown for fifteen long years. They’re impenetrable as a suit of armor.’ But his face, which looked unusually pale and vulnerable, belied his words. A moment later the mask descended” (p. 352).

- Is Mimus afraid to take risks?
- Is this jester’s motley his defense against a world that he won’t let in?
- Is he afraid to care for Florin? Or afraid of Theodo?

Mimus tries to delay the execution with a sleight-of-hand game until he can’t go on (p. 358). He then pretends to be the executioner—all to extend time (p. 362).

Could he possibly have done more?

- Are these the actions of a man who does not care?
- What motivates him?

When the castle walls start to fall and Theodo realizes he has been a fool, Mimus glows with “triumph” (p. 365).

- Is he triumphant in having beaten Theodo?
- Has he exacted his own revenge?
- What are Mimus’s feelings for Theodo? Why does he ask that he be spared? (p. 373)

Mimus pushes Florin away—glad to be rid of him, saying he would never have made a decent jester (p. 385).

- Are these his real feelings or can he not let his guard down even now?
- Perhaps he cannot leave the only life he knows?

KING PHILIP

Philip is an interesting character who we do not really get to know well.

By his own admission it is his “mean-spirited actions” (p. 263) that have led Theodo to exact such painful revenge.

At the close of the novel Philip is again powerful, yet he is unhappy “like a man with no home left on earth.”

Why?

KING THEODO

This novel continually plays with our notion of appearances. Theodo is described as: “Youthful in appearance, he was slim and lithe, with smooth, olive-skinned features, curly jet-black hair, and sparkling white teeth” (p. 39).

Continuing this obsession with outward appearance and story, Florin considers Theodo:

“That the devilish foe was a handsome, gracious monarch loved and revered by his subjects, and that Florin was utterly at his mercy and could do nothing about it—no minstrel had ever recounted such a story ...” (p. 140).

Theodo is a perfect fairytale prince yet his behavior towards Florin, his father and the other captive Moltovians is both cruel and unfeeling.

- Do all societies confuse good looks with moral virtue?

Mimus and Benzo are in no way the King's equals by the measures of their society.

- How does their respective behavior throughout the novel compare with Theodo's?
- Is Philip's past behavior any better than Theodo's?
- What does this say about a structured society such as this where some are born to rule?

BENZO

Florin's first description of Benzo:

“About Florin's height, he had coppery hair that encased his head like a helmet and a broad, good-natured face sprinkled with countless freckles. He was wearing the dirtiest smock Florin had ever seen.” (p. 102)

- How do we judge Benzo by this description?
- How would others in the text judge him?

Benzo is kind-hearted towards those less fortunate than himself. He treats Florin kindly, thinking him too slow to understand (p. 159).

Despite appearing compliant, Benzo is not unaware of the world around him. He describes King Theodo as “quite a snake” (p. 211).

Benzo is not a silly boy. Despite wanting adventure, he advises Florin against rash plans and counsels patience (p. 319). He also displays bravery at the tavern whilst helping Florin meet the rescue planners (p. 323).

- Is Benzo valued?

At the close of the story Benzo is offered land and title (p. 388) but he refuses and asks for a kitchen master's job instead. Why?

PRINCESS ALIX

Mimus warns Florin, “Watch your step with her,” Mimus growled. ‘She’s every inch her father’s daughter—looks as sweet as honey and venom like a viper.’” (p. 135)

- Despite this assessment of Alix, though, she has opportunities (p. 179, p. 344) when she can have Florin punished but does not. Why?
- Alix offers a drink to Philip when they are all hostage in the royal apartments, despite the disapproval of her own guards (p. 369). Why?

RADBOD

Radbod is with his father when the traitors pay homage to Theodo (p. 233). This supposed betrayal by his old friend disturbs Florin greatly.

Radbod is close: “he only had to stretch out his hand to touch him. At the same time, he was as far away as if an ocean lay between them’ (p. 237).

Radbod tries to tell Florin what has been happening but Florin explodes (p. 238).

Florin cannot see that Radbod does not think as his father does.

Later it is revealed that Radbod is the human mole tunneling under the castle walls: “In our mole you have a friend worthy of a king” (p. 338).

Florin had misjudged Radbod.

- Was Florin right to think as he did, or is this a symptom of his situation—unable to trust anyone?

THEMES

CLASS-BASED SOCIETY

Mimus is a very careful discussion of the nature of power and humanity. By using a strictly structured medieval society, Thal is able to explore the nature of power and what it means to rule. She also explores medieval society as an example of a rigidly stratified class system.

When Florin snaps at Rollo, the bestarius, Mimus excuses Florin by explaining that Florin is “weary of descending step after step ever downwards” (p. 94).

Rollo thinks he means the stairs of the monkey tower but Mimus is referring to Florin’s descent into another world where he exists near the bottom of the castle hierarchy; a descent into an almost alien world that is so vastly different from what he knew as a prince.

Florin himself recognizes the disparity, acknowledging that, in his view, Mimus is incorrect in thinking the world is the same at either end: “You were wrong Mimus, he thought to himself. Things look far from the same when seen from above and below” (p 198).

The lowest of classes is the jester (see also Themes–The Jester’s Life), treated as any other animal in the king’s menagerie. The jesters live in the monkey tower, are thrown tidbits at the table as one might do for a dog, and are even denied a soul and access to the church.

Mimus explains that “jester’s children are jesters from birth” (p. 278). They grow their donkey’s ears in the womb as princes grow their crowns.

- Are princes and jesters then similar?
- Are other characters in *Mimus* born into their roles?
- But Florin has become a jester—does this mean we can all change who we are?

The trappings of wealth appear to be equated with power in *Mimus* and power is at the center of the class system. Noble deeds, honor and compassion are often characteristics associated with the nobility (e.g. King Arthur stories). In *Mimus*, though, those that are at the top of the hierarchy are flawed. King Philip and King Theodo and many of their surrounding nobility let revenge or greed rule their decision-making.

- What, then, is Thal saying about the medieval class system?
- Who in the text does behave nobly, faithfully, and with honor and compassion?

Once removed from the trappings of wealth, former leaders are seen in a vastly different light. The highest members of Philip’s house, now that they are enslaved by Theodo, “resemble a band of captured pirates” (p. 44).

- Once their fine clothes are removed why do they appear so vastly different?
- Does their nobility not shine through?

Philip is at first disgusted with Florin in the jester costume. He makes him remove it (p. 256).

- Is Florin still a prince while in jester's motley ?
- Do we take on the persona of the clothes we wear?

It appears outwardly that in Florin's world you are what you wear.

Is the same true for our own society? Or for other present-day and historical societies?

- Does a suit, or a pair of board shorts, tell us something about the wearer?

At the end of *Mimus* neither Benzo nor Mimus want a radically new life, or a large reward, from Florin (pp 388 and 390).

- Why?
- Do these characters feel more comfortable in their own place?
- Is it because they value what they have?
- Or do they know that, in such a structured class system, you can never successfully move too far beyond your station and remain content?

Construct a diagram/flow chart/family tree to display the interconnected relationships between the characters and the strict, structured nature of the medieval-style society of the text. By placing the king at the top of this structure, the hierarchical power structure of medieval society should be clearly displayed.

WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN

(see also Recurring Motifs–Beast Imagery)

When Mimus describes what he sees as the benefits of being a “royal pet,” Florin considers him “truly no better than a beast,” “a person so lacking in pride” (p. 95).

The idea of what it is to be human permeates Thal's text. The very notion that jesters are less than human—without a soul, neither man nor beast (p. 106)—sets up a tension between what Mimus and Florin must be in order to survive, and the contradictory

behavior of both.

- Is Mimus really no more than the king's pet?
- Could Florin have survived without him?

Mimus is full of such contradictions. Theodo is cruel and malicious towards his prisoners, yet he is an affectionate father (p. 132) and a much-loved monarch. These two facts are difficult for Florin to reconcile. For him, a storybook, one-dimensional and universally-hated character would be easier to despise.

That appears keen to show us the complexity of human nature.

Contradictions about the nature of human existence also permeate Florin's more immediate feelings and responses. He says: "people are strange ... I've every reason to weep and gnash my teeth, but instead I blithely go on living. I breathe, eat and sleep ... I'm too miserable to give up" (p. 152).

Florin feels washing every day differentiates him from the beasts in the king's menagerie (p. 174).

- Is this all that sets us apart from animals?
- Is it all that sets Florin apart?
- Is the power of Theodo such that Florin begins to believe what he is told about himself?

As Florin's time in the castle continues, it is the simple pleasures of life that appear to bring Florin the most satisfaction—times spent being a "normal" boy with Benzo ("friendly islands in a cold, dark sea," (p. 208); friendship; a full belly; and the natural world (p. 197).

- Are these simple parts of living to be valued more than the trappings of wealth?

We share the love of simple fulfilments—shelter, food, companionship—with the animal kingdom.

- If not this, then what is it that sets us apart as humans?
- Are the characteristics you have thought of to be found within the characters in *Mimus*?

Theodo sees Florin is still proud of who he is and says: “beasts in my menagerie have no pride” (p. 134).

- Is pride a human characteristic? Why or why not?

The court crowd delights in the fight between the assembled troupe of jesters and various animals (p. 292 onwards).

- Are such contests entertaining sport?
- Why is the human race so fascinated with “other animals”?
- Why is it so insulting to call another human being an animal?

A JUST WAR

War, says Count Tillo, “turns castles into ruins and men into beasts” (p. 27).

- Is there evidence of this in *Mimus*?

Though many recognize the destructive nature of war within the text, there is also a strong feeling on either side that theirs is a ‘just’ cause; that God is on their side.

Theodo says: “Vinland enjoys God’s special protection” (p. 40). Later in the text, the citizens of Moltovia are said to feel that King Philip's capture may be God's punishment for their sins (p. 145).

- Is there such a thing as a ‘just’ war?

Theodo sees himself as “the victor ... over the vanquished” (p. 50), though Philip has signed a peace treaty. Theodo seeks to paint a picture of himself as a noble warrior who has justly beaten an opponent, not one who has triumphed through deception.

- How can he deceive himself?
- Does revenge blind him to his own actions?
- Is it always the truly righteous who win through in the end? At the end of the text does Philip appear the victor? (see p. 382)

The Moltovian traitors hail Theodo as their “salvation” and “rising sun” (p. 232).

- Is it right that they should do so?
- Should they save their own families and themselves or remain faithful to Philip?

Radbod informs Florin that others have remained loyal to the king despite loss to themselves, though he is too young to go openly against his father (p. 240). Ultimately, he is instrumental in Theodo's downfall (as the mole, p. 337).

- Is it easier, or harder, to be faithful or a traitor?

At the conclusion of the story *Mimus* makes the foolishness of war and the futile nature of the conflict between the two kingdoms to date very clear. He points out that, if they continue, all will die, women and children included; it is just a matter of the order in which it will happen.

This brings death closer to home for both royal families, yet many people have already died in their names.

- Is it only once it becomes personal and close to us that we understand the results of war?

Despite such lessons on the futility of war, humankind seemingly continues to consider war a solution.

- Why? Is such a solution ever correct or justified?

RIGHT VS. WRONG

Mimus contains many occasions where characters are faced with decisions about what is right or wrong. Consider each main character and the decisions that they face. For example, Benzo must decide whether to help Florin; Princess Alix is also faced with a number of occasions when she could have Florin punished.

It is Alix and her brother who try to warn Florin with the old woman's words after a sermon from the priest calling them to love their enemy (p. 202).

- Many of these decisions involve a character going against the laws of their own community. Would this be an easy thing to do?
- Are the characters that are able to do so showing bravery? What influences their decisions?

When Florin arrives to face Theodo there is a tension in the room: “The atmosphere in the room felt peculiar—an almost imperceptible vibration, like a current flowing beneath the surface of a calm stretch of water” (p. 41).

- Do the people of Theodo’s court consider Theodo's treatment of Florin wrong?
- If so, why don't they do anything?

The character of Mimus is a very interesting study in right or wrong. Mimus’s world seems to operate more in shades of gray. Nothing is necessarily right or wrong but everything is weighed up against a measure of how it might affect Mimus.

- Is this a fair assessment, or is Mimus truly a very moral man? Find evidence from the text to back up your argument.

Florin marvels at the behavior of Mimus—he is able to wolf down his food reward after working up Judge Bernardo into a heart attack (p. 123). In this instance he appears callous. On other occasions he appears to truly care about the welfare of Florin and risks his own life to help him.

Theodo’s lies appear attractive to Philip once he has spent some time in the dungeons. He admits to Florin that Theodo’s offer is hard to resist (p. 258). Is Philip, like Mimus, coming to the realization that self-preservation is uppermost when we are at our lowest?

- Do you think, at this point in anyone’s life, that what is right or wrong becomes irrelevant?

FAITH

A sense of faith, centered on prayer, is part of Florin’s life: “Although the Almighty had evidently forgotten him, Florin prayed as he had never prayed before.” He prays for his father and friends and also that Theodo will be struck with 'blindness, gout and consumption” (p. 103).

When he is turned away from the church because, as a jester, he has no soul, he feels that “it was like being abandoned in a desert without water” (p. 106).

Despite this, Florin feels that it is not God that has turned him away from the church but “only the king and his arrogant chaplain” (p. 106). He can separate the two and

sees that, on earth, it is not necessarily God that controls his church.

Philip says: “God has forsaken us, my son. All hope is gone” (p. 258), but Florin has news of the escape plan and this keeps their hope alive. It renews Philip’s faith and makes him feel that God will “lead us out of this dark and terrifying forest.”

When Florin appears to have successfully escaped, he thinks: “God had heard his prayer” (p. 82), but this is not true. He enlists God’s help many times on this run to freedom.

- Is this form of faith, displayed in the text, superficial?
- Do the characters truly believe or do they merely see God as a powerful ally to be called upon?

REVENGE

Discuss the following quotations in relation to the text:

In taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy, but in passing it over, he is superior.

Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903)

He that studieth revenge keepeth his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well.

John Milton (1608–1674)

An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948)

The stupid neither forgive nor forget, the naïve forgive and forget, the wise forgive but do not forget.

Thomas Szasz

Revenge is a powerful emotion and it is the motivating factor behind Theodo’s action in not only defeating the Moltovians but his attempts to humiliate them.

Florin sees that “Theodo has even had his hatred engraved in stone” as the portal shows a lion crushing a wolf (p. 204).

Benedict says that “the king has preserved his hatred for Philip in a leather shroud” (p. 150). Fully understanding the meaning of this statement enables Florin to comprehend the depth of Theodo’s hatred and lust for revenge. The full realization that Theodo’s pain is the result of his own father’s thoughtless and wilful actions brings home to Florin the fact that those he thought were beyond reproach may be flawed. Florin is coming to the realization that no man is perfect and that we should not judge by appearance alone.

They find the leather shroud in the cellars (p. 223).

Philip explains his part in Theodo’s brother’s death as “mean-spirited” (p. 263).

Mimus says of this: “They should have buried him [Morvan, Theodo’s brother] deeper. Then he would no longer haunt the living” (p. 269).

- Does keeping the skeleton in the leather shroud keep the injustice alive?
- Do you feel that Theodo’s actions are fueled only by revenge?

Some see Theodo’s actions as part of a larger plan. Benedict says: “The king’s calculation is simple: five countries for five healthy sons. Moltovia is only the beginning.” Count Maren answers: “Seldom have the chill hunger for power and the burning thirst for revenge gone so closely hand in hand” (p. 150).

Despite his thirst for power, Theodo refuses a great deal of gold in return for the captives’ release (p. 182). It appears his need to have power over them is stronger than his lust for gold. Or, perhaps, at this point, letting them go is not an option as he cannot control what will happen next.

- Has Theodo placed himself in an impossible position?

Theodo is not the only one who feels a strong need for revenge. Florin, in his early life as a jester, does too: “Still picturing with grim satisfaction how King Theodo would kneel, whimpering for mercy, amid the ruins of his castle, he fell asleep” (p. 78).

Mimus makes it clear that “cascades of blood” will not bring Theodo peace (p. 377).

Mimus’s advice at this point, when many lives hang in the balance, is a central message of the text, he says: “Turn yourselves inside out and let the wind blow through your hearts. Turn the sky upside down and start afresh. Leave the dead to the dead and beg forgiveness of the living. And, since you won’t manage any of those things, sit beside the fire and weave baskets!” (p. 377)

- What does Mimus mean?
- What is he trying to get them to see?

Florin can’t help himself though, he wants revenge, as it seems do many of the Moltovians. Mimus gives him a form of revenge in making Theodo jump through the hoops (p. 379).

- Is this satisfying for Philip and Florin? Why or why not?
- Why is this a “jester’s peace” (p. 382)?

FRIENDSHIP

Florin and Mimus

Florin, at the end of a bad dream, thinks he feels a “comforting hand stroke his forehead.” This happens on more than one occasion (pp. 87 and 127). On page 208, Florin does not stir when he feels the comforting hand, in an effort to keep Mimus close.

- Are they “friends”?
- Do they care for each other?

In the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment.

Charles Darwin (1809–1882)

Mimus takes very seriously his efforts to have Florin learn his jester role well.

- Does he take Charles Darwin’s view to heart?

Mimus says to the suggestion of Florin's death: "Who knows? ... If you play the game nicely he may forget who's under those ass's ears. Then you'll simply be little Mimus for evermore" (p. 126). He also suggests: "Then join in the game. Let the king laugh at you. The longer the cat enjoys itself, the longer the mouse survives (p. 311).

- Is this his plan for saving Florin's life?
- Or, by making Florin a good jester, does he merely save his own?

On more than one occasion Mimus's actions assist Florin, often putting his own existence in danger:

-Mimus distracts the chamberlain to enable Florin to overhear the conversation about the state of the war (p. 145).

-Mimus says "Be grateful to me ... Each of the king's chuckles earns you another day of life" (p. 152).

-Mimus is whipped for trying to tell the envoy, Count Victor, of Florin's identity (p. 184).

When Florin questions him as to why (p. 190), Mimus shrugs and does not answer. Mimus apologizes for Florin, making a joke of it, probably saving Florin another whipping (p. 244).

"Anger revives the spirits," (p. 310) says Mimus after talking of the entertainment at Philip's execution to distract Florin from his hunger.

At times, Florin and Mimus appear at ease with each other. On page 136, they share a joke and Florin laughs, much to Mimus's surprise. They appear casual and close.

When Philip speaks scathingly of Mimus (p. 255), Florin is shocked and hurt.

- When the rescue plans appear to be coming together, though, can Florin trust Mimus? (p. 346) What do you think?
- Is Mimus fueled only by self-preservation at this point, or is there something stronger between the two?

In trying to enlist Mimus to his cause, Florin enacts a short play between jesters that ends with the jester saying: "Because I am his friend and he is mine." Mimus says nothing except: "No harm must come to the king" (p.348). He makes Florin promise.

- Why is this important to Mimus?
- Is he also helping Florin as a friend, though he is unable to show his support more openly, or does he see the tide turning and choose to abandon a sinking ship?

Florin and Benzo

Florin’s friendship with Benzo is much more straightforward. It is based on the stronger, clearer emotions of two boys—one in need, the other happy for adventure and distraction.

Time with Benzo offers some release: “To Florin those afternoons were like friendly islands in a cold, dark sea” (p. 208).

When Benzo finds out Florin’s identity he asks why Florin didn't tell him earlier. Florin thinks to himself: “Because you’re the only person I can talk to, he thought. Because I’d die of loneliness but for you. Because I was afraid you’d turn on your heel. Because I need a friend ...” (p. 210).

The need expressed in this statement is very real.

- Discuss the truth of the following quotation, in relation to the importance of Benzo's friendship (and that of Mimus) to Florin:

Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art...it has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival.

C.S. Lewis (1898–1963)

- Could Florin have succeeded without Benzo’s help and support?

POWER

- Discuss the following quotations in relation to the text:

The love of liberty is the love of others; the love of power is the love of ourselves.

William Hazlitt (1778–1830)

Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts ... perhaps the fear of a loss of power.

John Steinbeck (1902–1968)

If absolute power corrupts absolutely, does absolute powerlessness make you pure?

Harry Shearer

You see what power is—holding someone else's fear in your hand and showing it to them!

Amy Tan

Knowledge is power.

Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character give him power.

Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865)

Philip views Theodo's action in bringing Florin to Bellingar as “devil inspired” (p. 46).

- But are his actions any worse than Philip's earlier treatment of Theodo's brother?
- Are any of the actions of either king justified?

Philip, head shorn and humiliated, on his knees before Theodo, appears “defeated” to Florin (p. 54).

- Is power a superficial construct?

The chapter titled “The donkey hunt” details how Florin is allowed to escape—as sport—providing further psychological torture for both Florin and Philip (p. 79 onwards).

- Does this exercise achieve Theodo's aims?
- Is this power?
- Is it difficult to wield power correctly? Who decides what is correct?

INNOCENCE/MATURITY

Florin's growth from naïve innocent into a more worldly-wise young man is a very strong theme running through *Mimus*. To some extent, the story also details growth towards a more mature approach in dealing with conflict for the kingdoms of Moltovia and Vinland as well.

Philip pleads for Florin saying: “spare the boy. He is innocent” (p. 52).

Following this, Philip is taken from Florin: “Without really seeing, Florin stared at the spot where his father had been standing a moment before. He felt as if something had been ripped from deep within him, leaving a gaping wound that oozed with pain and fury” (p. 54).

It is as if Florin’s youth/innocence/trust and his entire former world is taken from him, as represented by Philip, leaving a physical wound.

In one of Florin’s dreams he is bigger than his father and must now fend for himself (p. 86).

It is as if this is a call for Florin to stand up, become a man.

- Does he?

Florin is shown on the cusp of manhood; his voice is breaking as he sings (p. 195). Perhaps the trials that Florin must endure are his personal rite of passage to manhood.

As Florin changes and grows physically he also matures mentally. He learns how to handle others to his advantage: he convinces Benzo to help him scout the cellars with the promise of fencing lessons (p. 218) and he bargains with food to have Mimus help embarrass the traitors who are to come to court (p. 229). Yet, even in this, Mimus still bests him.

On pages 247–248, Florin witnesses the collar being placed on his godfather’s neck and begins to see that this is not a childish game; the chamber was “hell on earth.” This realization is also part of Florin’s growing maturity.

Despite his growth, Florin is still only a young boy and unburdening himself to his father is a great relief (p. 265), allowing him to let go and be young again.

Despite being almost too weak to stand, Florin has trouble losing the chess game to Theodo (p. 305).

- Is this a sign of immaturity, strength or stupidity?
- Does maturity develop with learning to come to terms with the past; remembering and embracing our past and seeing what it has taught us?

Florin's seal, once he is reinstated as prince and heir, incorporates the bells and ears of the jester's motley (p. 394).

- Why?

A JESTER'S LIFE

At the beginning of the story the boys of the Moltovian court find great delight in playing tricks on those around them (p. 9); inflated fish bladders, trip wires, the types of tricks that take on other meanings once they are part of Florin's jester life.

In addition, the "word fencing" Florin does with Mimus when they first meet is known to Florin from his games with his friends (p. 57).

- Is there already a jester in Florin?

When Florin does not want to wear the jester costume, Mimus says it is his choice: "Colored stripes or streaks of blood? Ass's ears or no ears at all? The jingle of bells or cries of pain" (p. 68).

- Are the choices as clear as they appear to be for Mimus?
- Should Florin refuse and take his punishment proudly?
- Which is worse, physical pain or emotional humiliation?

Florin spends time at the outset of the book learning his princely responsibilities—giving audiences at court (p. 11).

- Is this another form of acting out a part?

The costumes we wear, and the way we present ourselves, define our place in society. Florin wonders if he put the cap on would he "still be a son of God, or would he have joined the race of demons, like the bird- and dog-headed creatures that dwelt on the edge of the world?" (p. 69)

"The jester's peculiar nature ... He's nothing. Neither this nor that, neither fish nor flesh, neither man nor beast, neither God nor the devil's" (p. 106).

In a structured society, the jester is below the rank of any other human being.

"All jesters are called Mimus" (p. 71). Sharing the same name, they have no identity,

no place within humanity, not even a place in heaven.

Yet Mimus has “a note of pride” in his voice when he talks of the role of the Royal Jester (p. 74). Florin questions why Mimus is treated as a “beast among beasts,” yet Mimus sees advantage in being a “royal pet” (p. 95). To Mimus, it is the noble art of jesterdom: “laughter becomes praise” (p. 124). Mimus also appears to be proud of his appearance as a jester (p. 155).

- Is this defensive or heartfelt?
- Has Mimus found a place/identity that is his, no matter how distasteful?

Despite this, Mimus does not appear keen to wish his profession on children nor to suffer the loss of those children at the whim of the king (p. 278).

He is full of contradictions, as is his profession.

Florin says: “Everything here is foolish ... Everything but the fool himself” (p. 76).

- What does Florin mean?

The jesters are fools, not fully human and treated like animals, yet they are meant to entertain, be quick witted, inventive and fully conversant with all the aspects of the world around them.

- How do these contradictions sit side by side: the intelligent fool?
- How does Florin feel when he finds himself actually enjoying playing the fool and entertaining the crowd?(p. 117) Why?

To Benzo, the life of a jester is easy as it is not hard physical work (p. 174).

Count Victor is disparaging of Mimus to Florin, “naught but a jester,” despite Mimus risking much to save both Florin and others (p. 185).

- Why does nobody appear to recognize this?

LOVE

“... well and truly shackled, with or without a leg-iron” (p. 85): It is Florin’s love for his

father that ties him to his new role, as to escape will bring his father further harm.

“But even more of a torment than hunger and jester's bells was Florin's concern for his father.” (p. 99)

“... invisible shackles, strong as the heaviest of iron chains bind Florin.” (p. 188)

- Is this the kind of love that Mimus is avoiding?
- Is life worth living, though, without such attachments?

FATE

“Everyone forges his own destiny” says Florin in relation to Mimus's place in life. Florin is suggesting that Mimus could change his place in the world if he wished (p. 139).

- Is this just the wishful thinking of someone who is used to authority and does not fully understand the rigidity of the class structure?

But Mimus perceives it differently when he looks at Florin. He says: “All I can see is a miserable piece of iron being hammered into the shape of Theodo desires” (p. 140).

- What does he mean by this?

Such views shake Florin's view of his world and his place within it.

- Do we all like to feel we shape our own destiny? Do we shape it at all?

Princess Alix says: “A prince in jester's attire ... that comes of choosing the wrong father” (p. 131).

- Does she think she has chosen more correctly?

RECURRING MOTIFS

BEAST IMAGERY

Characters, items or places are described as animal-like on many occasions:

- Bellingar castle—“the lion's den” (p. 29)

- Monks—“like a flock of gray birds” (p. 29)
- Fox-headed man of Florin's dream (p. 30)
- The crone at the bridge is described as a “coal black raven” (p. 33)
- Theodo’s chancellor “his pointed nose and dark, beady eyes lent him the appearance of an overgrown rat” (p. 50)
- Guards are like “chained up watchdogs” (p. 90)
- “Bellingar crouched on top of its hill like some great, fleshy beast lying in wait for him—patient and motionless, sure of its prey” (p. 339)
- Florin tempts fate by telling a tale of frogs and snakes to the traitorous Moltovian nobility who have come to pay homage to Theodo (p. 234)

Beast/animal imagery is a constant throughout the text. This is linked closely to the central argument of the nature of man.

Interestingly, the comparison of a character to an animal can be either a compliment or an insult. Why?

Linking a character to an animal encourages the reader to see that character as embodying certain characteristics.

- Choose an animal and list the characteristics that we generally associate with it.
- Why do we perceive certain animals in a particular way?
- Are these perceptions accurate?

Philip

- Wolf of Moltovia

Theodo

- Lion of Vinland
- described by Benzo as “quite a snake” (p. 211)
- Florin and Mimus toy with suggesting different animals to represent Theodo—stoat, viper, weasel, polecat, scorpion, spider (p. 280)
- “cornered beast” (p. 380)

Mimus

- a frog (p. 48)
- bleating like a goat (p. 54)
- eats like an animal (p. 56)
- “a falcon ... a bird of prey” (p. 118)

Florin

- a "little pigeon," "fluttered in, all unsuspecting" (p. 65)
- inspected by the bestarius, Rollo, as if he was an animal (p. 65)
- "Makes a handsome donkey foal" (p. 69)
- called a donkey and hunted like an animal when he escapes (p. 84)
- likens himself to "a newly-caged beast" (p. 94)
- other servants see him as an "exotic beast" (p. 94)
- refuses to behave like a famished beast and wolf down his food (p. 117)
- trapped beast (p. 130)
- a lap dog (p. 146)
- "wincing like an animal ... whimpered and howled like a whipped cur" (p. 167)
- performing animal impressions: "bark like a dog, grunt like a hog" (p. 205)
- "behaving like an animal" at the tavern over food (p. 329)

By contrast the beasts of the Monkey Tower are seen as human-like. Zito the bear is seen as a fellow rival and the king's favorite from Mimus's point of view (p. 92).

Zito also lives in identical quarters to that of the jesters (p. 92).

DREAMS

Florin's dreams are central to his existence. His feelings and emotions appear to find release in the wandering of his exhausted mind in sleep.

- Are Florin's dreams prophetic?

On page 30, he dreams of a fox-headed man taking him through a desolate landscape to the end of the world. At this point he does not know the truth of what has taken place. He is being led by fox-like (i.e. cunning and duplicitous) people to a fate that will be the end of the world as he knows it.

Each of Florin's dreams either tells us about something that will happen or further explains Florin's feelings. Consider the following occasions:

- Florin dreams he is bigger than his father and must now fend for himself (p. 86)
- Florin dreams he doesn't remember his own name or recognize his father (p. 127)
- Florin dreams of the dungeon, suffocating and haunting his nights (p. 208)
- For the first time, Florin's dark dreams contain a glimmer of light (p. 242)

- Florin dreams he is riding with his father but finds it is Mimus—yet now they are heroes (p. 349)
- Though safe, Florin dreams of being a jester for a faceless audience (p. 390)

- What must Florin's father's dreams be like?

In times of stress, Florin sometimes drifts into a dream-like state: “He listened but understood not a word of what passed between them. One afternoon years ago, before he'd learnt to swim, he had given Muriel the slip and fallen into a pool in the forest. He remembered his utter bewilderment as its green waters closed over his head. That was just how he felt now; drowning in dark eddies of insanity. Surely a strong hand would reach down and haul him from the depths?” (p. 46)

At this point it is as if everything he is experiencing is a dream.

FOOD

As Florin's time as a jester lengthens, food becomes a central concern of his life. He is unused to going without.

Mimus continually distracts him in an attempt to take his mind off the need for food.

For example, Mimus says: “Forget your vile stomach and regale yourself with the divine food of poetry” (p. 136).

And when they are starving after having been denied food for six days, Mimus initiates an imaginary banquet to appease their hunger (p. 311).

Items once taken for granted by the prince now have an overwhelming significance: “It was a big apple, crisp and sweet, and he devoured it slowly and with relish ... The apple left a pleasantly warm sensation in his stomach ...” (p. 160).

The gruel they are given after their enforced starvation is the best meal Florin has ever eaten (p. 312). When Florin is offered food at the tavern while planning for the escape, he cannot help but 'cram' it into his mouth (p. 329).

At one point he considers eating fish guts (p. 173).

Mimus appears ruled by food. When Florin does not give him the chicken leg he feels

is his, he is very angry (p. 236).

Mimus does not appear to see the importance of pride to Florin.

- Why might this be the case?

When deprived of food for winning at chess, the hunger is like nothing Florin has experienced so far: “Hunger wasn’t the long-familiar companion that had made his stomach rumble at nights and aroused wistful dreams of gingerbread and roast goose; it had become a savage, sharp-toothed beast that ravaged his innards and tore at his flesh until he rolled around, whimpering, on the straw” (p. 308).

NAMES AND THEIR MEANINGS

Theodo means gift of God (p. 139).

Florin is a gold coin (p. 174).

Mimus is a word that describes the genus of the family *mimidacea* (mockingbirds).

- Is it possible that we are named appropriately, in line with our character, or do we become our name?

FURTHER / RELATED READING

***Crispin: The Cross of Lead* by Avi**

Set in medieval England, this novel explores of the plight a young boy who does not know the significance of his parentage. He sets out to discover his identity and forge a life for himself. Winner of the Newbery Medal.

The Pagan series by Catherine Jinks

Four books that explore the life of Pagan, a squire in the Crusades during the 12th century.

The Arthur series by Kevin Crossley-Holland

Moves between the story of Arthur in 12th century feudal England and the mythological world of King Arthur. Beautiful historical recreation.

***Lady Dance* by Jackie French**

Set during the Plague in Europe, it explores the power of belief amidst suffering.

***A Company of Fools* by Deborah Ellis**

Takes place in the Abbey of St. Luc during the time of the Plague. A story of death and survival told through the eyes of Henri, a choirboy.

***Catherine, Called Birdy, The Midwife's Apprentice* and *Matilda Bone* by Karen Cushman**

These are just some of Karen Cushman's historic medieval novels, all of which bring the hard, interesting lives of everyday people to life.

***Slaughterboy* and *Yoss* by Odo Hirsch**

These texts are set in a pre-industrial European landscape and deal with the life of Conrad and Yoss as they strive to live in a difficult world of hunger, deprivation and oppression. This is a dark and captivating world where survival is uppermost. There are obvious links to the medieval landscape of *Mimus*.