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YSS Engl S201 E: Shakespeare: Histories and Tragedies
T/Th 9-12:15 Online; zoom links on Canvas

The class is designed to explore examples of Shakespeare's Histories and Tragedies, trying to see what makes them great in the way that almost all readers and audiences have recognized (and also to think about what the generic distinction means and how useful it might be). The course attempts to discover the reasons for Shakespeare's unparalleled success, not in some fantasy of his timelessness but by seeing the plays as deeply embedded in the history of their own moment, as well as in later histories (including the one we are living in) that they in some part are responsible for. We will think about these as plays to be performed, as drama to be read, and as texts that have been constructed by the activities of various people, Shakespeare of course the first among them.

We will read *Richard III*, *Henry IV, part one*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*. There will be a short writing assignment each week and a final project. Students should read *Richard III* for our first meeting, so we don't waste one of our too few sessions.

But what are we really going to do? The major task is merely (*merely?* Hah!) to read the plays with all the attention and intelligence that they demand and deserve. Reading Shakespeare is hard. There is no point in pretending otherwise. And it is only enjoyable and valuable if you work hard at it. Most weeks there is only a single play to read. But these are plays that demands "slow" reading--what Nietzsche called *lento*: reading "*slowly, profoundly, attentively, prudently, with inner thoughts, with the mental doors ajar, with delicate fingers and eyes.*" It is—one of my fundamental beliefs—always worth it, though not always in the ways we are told. What are the pleasures and reassurances that reading Shakespeare provides. Reading him doesn't reliably make us better people, so we can forget that one. And the familiar "truths" that the plays give shape and voice to are for the most part predictable, even banal (e.g., love and kindness are better than hate and cruelty), and, in any case, are hardly original, no more so than are the plots and the characters of the plays. So what's the fuss. (Maybe that should have been the title of the course: **Shakespeare: What's the Fuss About?**) What I will say now is that for the most part it is *how* Shakespeare says things, not *what* he says, that matters. It is at the micro level of syntax and diction, even sometimes of silence, where the real action usually takes place.

I know that there is too much to read, and we have too little time. And so much has already been said. There's too much Shakespeare criticism. 50% of it is decent, maybe even good, but it is hard to know which 50%.

Oh, and maybe most important, is that there's a dangerous, often ugly, world out there that increasingly insists upon our anxiety about so many things (the world "begging to

differ / with all we've been taught to hope for," as a poet friend has written). On some days, I think that Shakespeare helps with that, but not always and rarely enough.

Maybe it is easier to say something about how the course will work, or should. We will think together. The goal is not to know (only) what I know. You can read my books and articles for that, if you care, but there may not be good reasons to care. (I will post files to some of my own stuff, in case curiosity gets the best of you.) I will talk, of course (sometimes too much), but I want to listen to hear what you see, and know, and care about, and also what you find confusing and difficult. This is a seminar, and the course will work only as well as you all are committed to it. **I assume you will not only come to class (i.e., on the zoom screen and with your camera on) each session, but also that you will come with things to say—and say them.** Each week there will be a prompt for each of you to write a paragraph or so to get the conversation started, and you should read one another's. To allow people have time to read these, I will ask you to post them on Canvas by 8PM on the Monday before class.

I expect you to show up, do the reading, think, think more, think even more, ask questions, give answers, help us all get smarter together. This is *our* class.

So, at long last, the **syllabus**. Although there are various reading assignments and there will be the weekly posts, the major task is merely (merely? hah!) to *read* Shakespeare's poems and plays. The syllabus here is provisional, and we may adjust it as we find out what we really want to talk about and how long we want to stay with something. Read in any edition you can get your hands on. There will be differences in what each of us is reading. That will turn out to be interesting.

May 27: What is a history play? *Richard 3*

May 29: *Richard 3*

June 3: *Henry 4, part one*

June 5: *Henry 5*

June 10: What is a tragedy? *Julius Caesar*

June 12: *Julius Caesar*

June 17: *Hamlet*

June 19: *Hamlet*

June 23: *Othello*

June 25: *Othello*

Final Paper due: July 1

Some (possibly) useful general bibliography:

Playtexts:

The early printings of Shakespeare's plays can be found in digital facsimiles at <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/facsimile/index.html> and at <http://www.quartos.org/>

Sources:

The two most important lexical and imagistic sources for Shakespeare are the Bible (in the Geneva translation or that of the Bishops' Bible) and The Book of Common Prayer (1559 version). There are of course other sources, particularly Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Plutarch's *Lives* for the Classical plays, and Holinshed's *Chronicles* for the histories. Any edition will give you information about the sources for any individual play. But just what counts as a "source" is something useful to think about.

Useful databases

OED: Oxford English Dictionary

EEBoO

DEEP [Database of Early English Playbooks]: <http://deep.sas.upenn.edu>

JSTOR:

Print Editions: There are many excellent editions of Shakespeare's plays (and no one that is definitive). I don't care which text you use, but each different edition will inevitably have a slightly different text. Among the better "complete Shakespeares" are:

The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Greenblatt, et. al.

The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. Evans

Complete Works of Shakespeare (Scott-Foresman), ed. Bevington

The Complete Pelican Shakespeare, ed. Braunmuller and Orgel

The Arden Complete Shakespeare, ed. Proudfoot, Thompson, Kastan, and Woudhuysen

Individual plays have been edited in various series. The one with the fullest notes and commentary is the Arden Shakespeare; there are also editions published by Bantam, Barnes and Noble, Folger, Signet, Penguin, Oxford, and Cambridge that are responsibly edited and with adequate notes. There are online editions that are reasonably good and available for free. The best of these is the Folger Shakespeare:

<https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/>

Overviews and Introductions:

A Companion to Shakespeare, ed. Kastan

Companion to Shakespeare and Performance, ed. Hodgdon and Worthen

The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare, ed. DeGrazia and Wells

Oxford Companion to Shakespeare, ed. Dobson and Wells

Shakespeare's Life:

Chambers, E. K., *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*

Duncan-Jones, Katherine, *Ungentle Shakespeare*

Greenblatt, Stephen, *Will in the World*

Sehonenbaum, Samuel, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*

Shapiro, James, *A Year in the Life of Shakespeare: 1599*

Shakespeare's Times:

Brigden, Susan, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: The Rule of the Tudors, 1485-1603*

Collinson, Patrick, *The Reformation: a History*
Coward, Barry, *The Stuart Age*
Cressy, David, *Education in Tudor and Stuart England*
Kishlansky, Mark, *A Monarchy Transformed: Britain 1603-1714*
MacCulloch, Diarmaid, *The Later Reformation in England, 1547-1603*
Pailliser, D. M., *The Age of Elizabeth*
O'Day, Rosemary. *The Longman Companion to the Tudor Age*
Wrightson, Keith, *English Society 1580-1680*

Shakespeare's Theater:

Baldwin, T. W., *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Acting Company*
Bentley, G. E., *The Profession of Dramatist and Player in Shakespeare's Time, 1590-1642*
Gurr, Andrew, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's England*
Gurr, Andrew, *The Shakespearean Stage*
Palfrey, Simon and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts*

Shakespeare's Texts:

Erne, Lukas, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*
Jowett, John, *Shakespeare and Text*
Kastan, David Scott, *Shakespeare and the Book*
Murphy, Andrew, *Shakespeare in Print*
Stern, Tiffany, *Making Shakespeare*

Shakespeare's Language:

Blake, Norman, *Shakespeare's Language: an Introduction*
Hope, Jonathan, *Shakespeare and Language: Reason, Eloquence, and Artifice in the Renaissance*
Kermode, Frank, *Shakespeare's Language*
MacDonald, Russ, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language*

There are of course thousands of articles and books on Shakespeare. I am happy to advise you further, and there are various search engines (MLA bibliography and JSTOR are perhaps the best)—**but, what I want most is that you read and re-read the plays slowly, alertly, and intensely—“with delicate fingers and eyes,” as Nietzsche said.**

A few things I am supposed to say:

Grades: I assume you will all kill it. I am not good enough at math to create percentages that add up to 100. All the obvious things count. The things you do best will count the most. You chose this class, so I am assuming you want to be here.

The Real Objectives: 1) learn more about Shakespeare; 2) learn more about what interpretation is, demands, and maybe also about what it can't do and perhaps shouldn't; and 3) think more about how or if or literature matters.

I assume that all work submitted is your own and that you will follow the usual conventions of documentation and citation. The concept of academic dishonesty or cheating is detailed at greater length in the Undergraduate Regulations: www.yale.edu/yalecollege/publications/uregs. **AI isn't your own work.**

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: Yale is committed to offering auxiliary aids and services to students with verifiable disabilities, in compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. To ensure that their individual needs are addressed, students with special needs are encouraged to contact the Dean of Students Office as early as possible.

If you have any questions let me know. I will always answer emails within 24 hours, usually much more quickly.