

The Catholic University of America
Department of English

**ENG 462: Shakespeare's political drama
Spring 2009**

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This course offers a study of Shakespeare's political drama. We will read Shakespeare's second tetralogy of English history plays—*Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*—and three Roman tragedies: *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. These plays feature clashes of the proud and powerful, rebellion and civil war, crowd-stirring rhetoric and behind-the-scenes intrigue; taken together, they offer an extended meditation on the workings of high politics. We will ask whether it is possible to discern from these plays a Shakespearean political philosophy, and if so what it looks like; we will consider how the political arenas represented in these plays are like and unlike our own. Other topics will include scansion, Shakespeare's chronicle sources, Shakespearean texts, Shakespeare on film, performance in Shakespeare's time and ours.

Required texts

- *Shakespeare's Histories*, ed. David Bevington (Longman, 2007)
- *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, ed. David Bevington (Longman, 2007)
- *Peter Saccio, Shakespeare's English Kings* (Oxford, 1999)

Course requirements

- Three 5-6 page essays: 15% each of final grade
- Midterm exam: 15%
- Final exam: 25%
- Other (classwork, shorter assignments): 15%

Goals for student learning

The general goal of the course is to learn to read Shakespeare with understanding and delight. Particular skills you will develop over the semester include:

- Reading Shakespeare's plays as literature
- Reading Shakespeare's plays as drama
- Understanding the metrical structure of Shakespeare's verse (and so, by extension, that of most serious poetry in English before 1900)
- Strengthening writing skills
- Reading poetry aloud
- Understanding early modern English
- Increasing vocabulary

Readings

The most important thing you can do to succeed in this course, to enjoy it, and to gain lasting benefit from it is to read the assigned texts well. Reading Shakespeare is a deeply rewarding activity, and like other rewarding activities it requires time, concentration and some practice. You'll read most effectively when well rested, in a distraction-free room, with dictionary and notebook to hand. As you read, use the techniques outlined in the paper on "How to read Shakespeare" included with this syllabus. Supplementary readings will be posted online or distributed in class. I will give you study questions for some reading assignments; you should come to class prepared to discuss or write on them.

Essays

Essays are to be submitted both in hard copy and electronically. The hard copy should be double-spaced, in twelve-point type with a one-inch margin. Essays and all written assignments are due at the beginning of class on the specified date; grades on late papers will be adjusted downward one step (e.g. B to B-) per day late. In your essays I expect you to follow the conventions of standard written American English in grammar, usage, punctuation and spelling, and to cite sources according to Chicago humanities style: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html. See "Explanation of Essay Grades" to learn how I evaluate your written work.

Class meetings

Classes will consist of lecture, discussion, and other activities. The work we do in the classroom is an integral part of the course, and your contribution to the life of the class will figure in your final grade. Attendance and participation are expected for each class meeting, though you may without penalty miss two classes a term, no questions asked. I expect you to come to class prepared; "prepared" means on time, with the day's reading completed and on hand, your phone turned off and your wits about you.

I will hold **office hours** on Tuesday and Thursday from 11-12 and on Tuesday from 1-3. You are welcome to visit me during these hours at any point in the semester, with or without a prior appointment. If you can't make it during my regular hours, let me know and we will arrange another time to meet. Outside of office hours, the quickest way to get in touch with me is by email.

Academic honesty

I hold each student responsible for understanding and adhering to CUA standards of academic honesty (detailed at <http://policies.cua.edu/academicundergrad/integrityfull.cfm>), and will enforce those standards without exception.

Schedule of readings and assignments

1-13 Introductory
1-15 *Richard II*; Saccio chap. 1
1-20 Inauguration Day: no class
1-22 *Richard II*; Saccio chap. 2
1-27 *Richard II*
1-29 *Henry IV, part I*
2-3 *Henry IV, part I*
2-5 *Henry IV, part I*; Saccio chap. 3
2-10 Shakespeare's verse; **essay #1 due**
2-12 *Henry IV, part II*
2-17 *Henry IV, part II*
2-19 *Henry IV, part II*
2-24 *Henry IV, part II*; midterm review
2-26 **midterm exam**
 Spring break
3-10 *Henry V*
3-12 *Henry V*; Saccio chap. 4
3-17 *Henry V*
3-19 Prof. G. at conference: no class
3-24 *Julius Caesar*; **essay #2 due**
3-26 *Julius Caesar*
3-31 *Julius Caesar*
4-2 *Antony and Cleopatra*
4-7 *Antony and Cleopatra*
4-9 Holy Thursday: no class
4-14 *Antony and Cleopatra*
4-16 Shakespeare's text; **essay #3 due**
4-21 *Coriolanus*
4-23 *Coriolanus*
4-28 *Coriolanus*
4-30 *Coriolanus*; final review
5-7 8-10 AM: **final exam**

How to read Shakespeare

1) *Clarify each word that you don't understand.*

In reading Shakespeare you will come across many unfamiliar words, as well as seemingly familiar words used in unfamiliar senses. There are two main reasons why this is so. The first is that Shakespeare's vocabulary is extraordinarily rich. The second is that he wrote four hundred years ago, and many English words have undergone shifts in meaning in the meantime. As you read, you will encounter words that are no longer in current use, such as *grizzle*, a grey hair, or *neaf*, fist. You will also encounter many words that look familiar but are used in senses no longer primary, such as *conceit*, which in modern English means "arrogance" but in Shakespeare means "thought" or "idea." Deceptively familiar words like this can be tricky, because you can pass them without realizing that you haven't understood them; you may think you have, but then you read on and the surrounding passage doesn't quite make sense, or you find yourself feeling blank, distracted, sleepy, or confused. As soon as this happens, *stop*. Do not carry on and settle for the general gist of the passage; if you do, your sense of blankness or confusion will only intensify. Rather, go back and locate the word or words that you haven't yet understood, and clear them up according to the following procedure:

I) Find the definition for your word that makes sense in the appropriate context.

To locate definitions, make use of the following tools:

-Consult marginal notes in your text.

-Consult your dictionary. If the word has multiple definitions, scan them and identify the one that best fits the context. Since you are dealing with early modern English, the appropriate definition may well be indicated as "archaic" or "obs," obsolete. Your pocket or computer dictionary won't have these older definitions, which very often are the ones you need—this is why you need a good dictionary. The best for the purpose is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, available online via the CUA libraries page under "databases" or at <http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>

II) Make up a few sentences using your word in the appropriate sense. Do this to make the word your own, ensuring that you'll recognize it when you next see it. Keep making sentences until you can do so effortlessly.

This procedure will take time, especially at first, but you will find it time well spent. As you gain acquaintance with Shakespeare's early modern English, you will find yourself recognizing previously unfamiliar words, and to the satisfaction of understanding Shakespeare you will add the satisfaction of building your vocabulary.

2) *Read aloud.*

Shakespeare was a professional man of the theater; he wrote his plays to be performed as well as read. Reading Shakespeare aloud is fun, and it enhances your understanding in several ways. When you read a passage aloud, you'll quickly be able to identify the words whose meanings you're unsure of. Reading aloud helps you to get a feel for the rhythm of Shakespeare's verse, and for the interplay of verse and prose in the plays, as we will discuss later in the term. Reading aloud also helps you to get a sense of the tone of a passage; as you read, ask yourself "How might this character deliver these lines?" If you can, find somebody to read with or read to.

Form reading groups with your classmates and read scenes together. Read Shakespeare to your family and friends. Commit passages to memory and recite them at parties. You'll be a hit.

3) *Imagine performance possibilities as you read.*

Keep in mind that you're reading a play, and imagine how a given line, speech, or scene might be presented on stage. As you read, ask yourself: Where is this scene taking place? To whom does the speaker deliver his or her lines? Who else is on stage, and what is going on? The more you read with your visual and theatrical imagination engaged, the more sense the play will make.

4) *Notice figurative language.*

Shakespeare's plays are full of figurative (non-literal) expressions, such as similes, metaphors and personification. When you can't figure out what a particular word or expression is doing in a passage, it's a good bet that it's being used figuratively.

Take, for example, a line such as "The dullness of the fool is the whetstone of the wits" (*As You Like It*, 1.2.52-53). To understand this line, you first need to know that a whetstone is a sharpening-stone and that "wits" means "intelligence"; then you need to recognize that the expression "whetstone of the wits" is a metaphor. The speaker of this line, Celia, is saying that fools with their odd behavior (dullness) keep others' minds sharp (as a whetstone would do for a knife).

5) *Notice antithesis.*

No rhetorical figure is more important to Shakespeare's art than antithesis, the contrast of two terms: "To be or not to be." You will notice that Shakespeare is forever setting up contrasts, drawing distinctions, opposing X and Y. If a line or a passage is obscure, ask yourself, "what is being opposed to what?" Often the meaning of a knotty passage depends on the antithesis of two key terms.

6) *Notice jokes and puns.*

Shakespeare's plays, especially the comedies, are full of rapid wordplay, jokes (including many dirty ones) and puns. Often the humor depends on double senses which Shakespeare's audience would have grasped immediately, but which you may need to pause to figure out.

Example: *Messenger*: I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.

Beatrice: No. An he were, I would burn my study.

(*Much Ado About Nothing*, 1.1.73-75)

To get the joke, you need to see that Beatrice is treating literally the figurative expression "in your books," which means "in your favor." (You also have to know that here "an" means "if"; see what I mean about deceptively familiar words?) When you find yourself groaning at a bad Shakespearean joke, that's a good sign.

7) *Straighten out the syntax.*

"Syntax" means "the way words are put together to form sentences." When you run into a syntactically complex passage, begin by breaking it into sentences rather than lines, and do a grammatical analysis. Identify the subject and main verb. Locate direct and indirect objects. Figure out which words modify which other words. Distinguish main and subordinate clauses. (If

you're not familiar with these terms, a manual such as the *Little, Brown Essential Handbook for Writers* will clarify them.)

8) *Take notes as you read.*

Take notes about individual characters—their motivations, significant actions, relationships to one another, key lines. Make plot summaries. Write down questions and observations as they come to mind, and bring them up in class. These notes will not only help you figure out what's going on in the plays, but will aid your memory in preparing for exams.

9) *Reread* (and reread, and read again.)

Once you've done the preliminary work of reading for understanding, you'll be ready to read for delight. After you've worked through a passage slowly, stopping to clarify vocabulary and syntax, go back and read it again. You'll find that you can read it more fluently and that you can better appreciate the beauty of Shakespeare's language. Reread as often as you can. You'll be amazed at how much more you notice and appreciate each time.

Prof. Tobias Gregory
The Catholic University of America

Explanation of Essay Grades

The grading of essays is not as subjective a process as you may think. I expect to receive honest and thoughtful writing from you, and in return you may expect that I am not grading your opinions or personality. The following descriptions of each grade will help you to understand what I am looking for in your essays, and how I evaluate them.

“F”. The “F” essay wholly fails to fulfill the assignment. It shows no thought. It is unacceptably brief, or riddled with grammatical or spelling errors, or so poorly constructed or carelessly written that I cannot follow the sequence of ideas. This category includes otherwise adequate essays that have no bearing on the assigned topic; I consider this to be one way of showing no thought.

“D.” The “D” essay is minimally acceptable. It relates to the assignment, but shows little evidence of serious engagement with the topic. It may contain several serious grammatical errors, or I may have difficulty following the sequence of ideas. A literary essay written at the “D” level may contain basic misreadings of the text; an argumentative essay may lack support for its assertions.

“C:” The “C” essay is acceptable. It fulfills the assignment, but does little more. It contains few major grammatical errors, but suffers from vague or clichéd word choice. I can follow the sequence of ideas without much difficulty, but also without much pleasure; this essay takes no risks and offers no surprises.

“B:” The “B” essay does more than fulfill the assignment. It features both sound organization and creative thought. While it may contain a few rough spots, it is free of serious grammatical errors. The sequence of ideas is clear without banality; the writing exhibits varied sentence structure and careful word choice.

“A:” The “A” essay is outstanding. It goes beyond the requirements of the assignment and takes intellectual risks. The writing is clear and vigorous; the style is well suited to the essay’s subject matter and purpose. A literary essay at the “A” level offers a thoughtful response to the text and, when called for, makes appropriate use of secondary literature. An argumentative essay at the “A” level shows awareness of the complexities of the issue under discussion, and considers counter-arguments and opposing viewpoints.

(Adapted from Maxine Hairston, *Instructor’s Manual: Contemporary Composition*, 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986.)