

# English 230-02: Shakespeare's Major Plays

Rhodes College, Department of English

Professor Newstok

Fall 2007  
MWF 1:00-1:50pm  
Buckman 330

*newstoks@rhodes.edu*  
Palmer 310

Office hours: Tu 8:00-noon, or by appointment (please *email*)

## Course description

A discussion-based seminar on Shakespeare's works, with special attention to the problem of **genre**, as well as some reflections on what counts as "**major**." We begin by closely reading and memorizing selected sonnets. We then examine representative "Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies" from his earlier (*Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Richard III*), middle (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Henry IV*, *Hamlet*) and later periods (*Henry V*, *Macbeth*, *Tempest*), concluding with the generically mixed *All is True*. While we will concentrate our efforts primarily on the **texts** of the plays, along the way we will be exploring the greater 'context' of Shakespeare, from the sixteenth-century meaning of individual words to the continued impact of his works today. The course is designed to give you extensive practice in reading Shakespearean drama critically, and preparation for enjoying Shakespeare throughout your life.

## Schedule—subject to revision, per class interest and instructor's direction

*Have the texts read **before** our discussions each week. Ideally, you will read them once over the weekend, and then **re-read** them during the week—good reading always entails **re-reading**. Be sure to bring your **Norton Shakespeare** to each class so you can follow along.*

<i>Week of</i>	<i>Readings</i>	<i>Assignment</i>
Aug. 20	<b>"Shakespeare" &amp; "Major"</b>	<i>Quiz on syllabus and Norton pp. 1-76</i>
Aug. 27	<b>Sonnets &amp; close reading</b>	<i>Memorization of one sonnet</i>
<i>[Sept. 3—Labor Day—no class]</i>		
Sept. 5	<b>Titus Andronicus</b>	<i>One word/OED exercise</i>
Sept. 10	<b>The Comedy of Errors</b>	<i>Emblematic phrase for a subtitle</i>
Sept. 17	<b>Richard III</b>	<i>Explication of one speech (25-45 lines)</i>
Sept. 24	<b>A Midsummer Night's Dream</b>	<i>Rhetorical tropes</i>
Oct. 1	<b>Henry IV, part i</b>	<i>Five-act progression</i>
Oct. 8	<b>Hamlet</b>	<i>Comparison of scene from two movie versions</i>
<i>[Oct. 12–16—Fall Recess—no class]</i>		
Oct. 17	<b>Henry V</b>	<i>Source study</i>
Oct. 22	<b>Macbeth</b>	<i>Contrast two characters from two plays</i>
Oct. 29	<b>The Tempest</b>	<i>Shakespearean geography</i>
Nov. 5	<b>All is True</b>	<i>Generic blending</i>
Nov. 12	<b>Library research sessions</b>	<i>Final paper proposals</i>
Nov. 19	<b>Meetings with instructor to discuss research</b>	<i>Annotated bibliography</i>
Nov. 26	<b>In-class presentations of work-in-progress</b>	<i>Preliminary precis</i>
Dec. 3	<b>Draft of research paper due Dec. 3, followed by peer reviews</b>	<i>Draft due</i>
Dec. 10	<b>Revised final paper due</b>	<i>!</i>

## Requirements

**Engagement (20%)** is mandatory. This is broadly conceived to include active participation (listening to responding to your peers as well as the professor), consistent preparation of course readings, enthusiasm for assignments, collaboration with your peers, and respect for the course. A brief, one-question weekly **quiz** will regularly gauge your engagement with the readings. If you miss **more than three sessions** of our course, you will receive a 0 for engagement; if you **miss more than six sessions** (that is, two full weeks of the semester!), you will fail the course. Successful students are those who read thoroughly in advance of discussion, arrive on time to class, and participate thoughtfully every day of the semester.

**Short essays (25%)** are single-spaced one-page arguments (**400 words** each) designed to familiarize you with a number of different *kinds* of approaches to reading Shakespeare—from examining very minute details to considering larger issues across multiple texts. Hard copies (not email attachments) are due **every Tuesday by 4pm in my office (Palmer 310)**. **No late work**—the responses prepare your thoughts in advance of Wednesday’s discussion. Numerical ‘grades’ (a rough score out of 10) will be assigned to give you a sense of your progress. *Groups presenting a critical survey are exempt from the assigned short essay of their week.*

**Critical surveys (25%)** will be undertaken by two or three students for each play. The purpose is two-fold: to gain familiarity with researching recent Shakespearean scholarship (as suggested by the Norton), and to share with the class your expertise on that scholarship.

- An **annotated bibliography** will be distributed for future reference; this should be around 2000 words, single-spaced, with approximately a dozen entries (all those listed in Norton, and two additional ones that you have found on your own). Each entry should give a brief (4-5 sentence) overview of the article, and evaluate its possible use for your fellow students.
- In addition to researching this material, you must watch at least one major **film version** of the play, and give us a sense of what that particular adaptation entailed.
- At the end of Wednesday’s class, the group will distribute a **critical essay** for discussion on Friday.
- As you **lead the class** on Friday, you will also need to present to us a kind of intellectual “family tree” or “map,” showing the relationship among the critics you surveyed.

**Final projects (30%)** involve engaging in a **critical dialogue** with other readers (critics) of Shakespeare’s plays, leading to a **3000-word** research paper on a topic of your own choice. The plays addressed, however, must be selected from those read in this course—your audience consists of your peers, so you will need to address plays with which they are already familiar.

**Grading:** A ‘C’ represents satisfactory work; a ‘B’ represents good work; a ‘B+’ represent very good work; and an ‘A-’ and the infrequent ‘A’ represent extraordinary achievement. This holds true for your overall engagement, your short essays, your critical surveys, and your final projects.

## Policies

As always, please observe Rhodes guidelines regarding the Honor Code; academic dishonesty will not be tolerated, and an Honor Code violation (including plagiarism) will be grounds for failure in the course. Respect the integrity of the course: please turn off cell phones and remove hats before entering the classroom; please do not eat during class. Treat email exchanges with one another and with the professor as if you were composing formal correspondence. Please also observe the attached departmental policies.

### Typical Week

Weekend	<i>Read play <b>at least once in full</b></i>
Monday	<i>Brief quiz; discussion of general issues (title; genre; themes)</i>
Tuesday	<i>Short essay due by <b>4pm</b></i>
Wednesday	<i>Focused discussion &amp; close reading; critical survey group hands out article</i>
Thursday	<i>Read and respond to critical article</i>
Friday	<i>Presentation of critical survey; discussion of article</i>

## Major Shakespearean Themes

*(weekly quizzes will be based on these)*

- **Economy** (exchange, gift, debt, obligation, gratitude, wealth, expenditure, risk)
- **Law** (personal ethic, trial, honor, religious principle, loyalty, fidelity, faith)
- **Authority** (state, kingship, tyranny, election, obedience, rule, power, choice)
- **Memory** (forgetting, perpetuation, narrative, news, memorial, monument)
- **Family** (kinship, brotherhood, generation, inheritance, disowning, incest, friend)
- **Identity** (likeness, self, madness, [in]consistency, development, nation, belief)
- **Ritual** (ceremony, bond, oath, curse, wedding, funeral, coronation, society)
- **Sexuality** (reproduction, bastardy, affection, lust, chastity, intimacy, privacy)
- **Justice** (cruelty, pity, mercy, revenge, forgiveness, judgment, discipline)
- **Proof** (evidence, witness, secrecy, revelation, argument, truth, falsity)
- **Performance** (action, playing, theater, role, reality, deception, disguise, plot, habit)
- **Reading** (literacy, writing, sign, interpretation, messenger, text, theory, naming)
- **Emotion** (passion, laughter, tears, rage, melancholy, calm, humanity, love)
- **Body** (parts, inwardness, blush, heart, soul, torture, commonwealth, gender)
- **Place** (geography, position, nature, court, banishment, travel, scene, home, country)
- **Religion** (God, the supernatural, fate, magic, salvation, repentance, will, spirit)

*All of these categories could easily be reorganized, and most of the individual components could fit comfortably in different categories—for instance, **inheritance** depends on legal authority for the proper remembrance of the family's wishes in ritually transferring property to a particular body; the reading of the will can easily elicit great emotions in that it will reform the identities of those present in a place for its performance. Even sexuality comes into play—while primogeniture technically means inheritance by the first-born child, in practice it usually meant first-born son (that is, legally first-born, and not a bastard)—is this just?*

In addition, you should always pay attention to **keywords** in the play—those words which are emphatically repeated (or, conversely, have a unique but significant appearance) and emblemize a major concern (thematic or otherwise) of the play. Shakespeare had such a massive vocabulary that his insistence upon a special set of terms will often serve as an insight into fundamental issues at play in a particular drama.

## Short Essays—guidelines

*Short essays* are 400-word, single-spaced arguments (no more than one page) designed to familiarize you with a number of different *kinds* of approaches reading Shakespeare—from examining very minute details to considering larger issues across multiple texts. As the semester progresses you will be able to incorporate the ‘tools’ from earlier essays into your increasingly nuanced compositions. They are also intended to give you some expertise on a particular topic for discussion that week, and serve as preparation for our meetings; it is often only through writing that we come to recognize what we have to say. Hard copies (not email attachments) are due **every Tuesday by 4pm in my office (Palmer 310)**.

There will be **ten** short essays throughout the term, which means a good deal of writing for you. However, the writing will be in short and regular assignments (there is no longer mid-term essay), and the habit should prove useful for you—you’ll have a record of your thoughts from throughout the term; you’ll become accustomed to engaging with Shakespeare on a very particular level; you’ll always be prepared for discussion. **No late work**—the short essays prepare your thoughts in advance of Wednesday’s discussion.

### Suggestions from a former student:

How to Write Short Essays For Professor. Newstok –

I mean,

“How to Write Thoroughly Yet Specifically About Shakespeare in a Very Small Space”

\* \* \* \* \*

1. “What does he mean by ‘focus on the text’???”

He means Use the Text – standard quotation style. You don’t have to quote entire passages – just a few pertinent lines. Words are always open to interpretation, so if you are going to have a fabulous interpretation of the text you just read, you need to show whoever is going to read your paper what it was that inspired your thinking. (citations, yes!)

2. “Why can’t I have a stinking intro paragraph?”

You don’t have a lot of space. So instead of writing about what you are going to write about – just write it.

3. “What does he mean ‘focus on specific words’???”

Here’s a special hint: lift an author’s word (from the lines you are already using), and use it in your own text, perhaps in a slightly different way. Know what it means and how it is used in the lines you are discussing. It seems very trivial and difficult, but it’s really not that hard. All you have to do is pay attention and respect and enjoy the language you are using.

4. “I can’t think of a good topic!”

Don’t stress too much about this. You’re not going to have some complex “thesis” that you are going to “prove.” You do, however, want to say something interesting about the passages you are talking about. While you are reading, write notes in the margins about what interests you or catches your attention or just doesn’t make any sense. The best topics are the ones that interest you already, but sometimes you forget what you were thinking after you finish reading and wipe the sweat off your brow. This way, if you have passages underlined and notes in the margins, you’ve got your work cut out for you - you have your own personal interest designated AND the appropriate lines to talk about – what could be better? Then you write about what you were already thinking – in an intelligent and informed way – and you’re all set!

## Critical surveys—guidelines

On Fridays, small groups (of two or three students) will present their findings from a survey of significant critical work on that week's play. The purpose is two-fold: to gain familiarity with researching recent Shakespearean scholarship (as suggested by the Norton), and to share with the class your expertise on that scholarship.

- An **annotated bibliography** will be distributed to the class for future reference; this should be around 2000 words, or four pages single-spaced. Approximately a dozen entries will be included—all those listed in Norton bibliography following each introduction, and two additional ones that you have found on your own.
- *Nota bene: If you can get your bibliography to me by 5pm on Thursday (the day before your presentation), I can have copies ready for the class in the afternoon. Otherwise, you need to print these up yourselves.*
- **Resources** for finding those two additional essays include:
  - Wandering around our extensive **Shakespeare holdings** in the Barrett library
  - **Other editions** of the plays, which often provide a survey of critical responses.
  - **WSB (World Shakespeare Bibliography)** and **MLA (Modern Language Association) Bibliography**—two major annual surveys of scholarship
- In addition to researching this material, you should watch at least one major **film version** of the play, and give us a sense of what that particular adaptation entailed. Check out the massive catalog of Shakespearean films that our library holds—a full run of the BBC versions as well as more than 100 other adaptations.
- At the end of Wednesday's class, the critical group will distribute an **exemplary critical essay** to the class for discussion on Friday. This should be approximately 15 pages long, and serve as a springboard for our conversation about the play.
- As you **lead the class** on Friday, you will also need to present to us a kind of intellectual "family tree," showing the genealogical relationship among the critics you surveyed. (Alternatively, think of this as a MAP of themes critics address.) Try to keep an eye out for what keeps recurring, so you can tentatively suggest to us that "this seems to be **the standard book** on Shakespeare and \_\_\_\_\_" or "this is **an influential essay** on Shakespeare's use of \_\_\_\_\_."

*While you certainly won't be able to read anything near ALL of the critical material on your particular play, hopefully you can give us a sense of CATEGORIES of responses to the play—for example, "For much of the 20th century, Henry V has been read through two opposing approaches: one that claims the play idealizes its hero, and the other that argues for a more subversive critique of his character from within the play itself. . . ." **Generalize**; don't merely place the sources into critical 'schools,' but rather try to see commonalities beyond theoretical approaches: does one group of readers seem particularly troubled by a certain **character or scene**? does another group of readers concentrate on the playwright's **versification**? is there a **peculiar manner** in which this play is always addressed? Have there been **patterns** in the critical reception of the play in the last century? Try to give us a sense of **what consistently troubles readers of this play**.*

## Notes toward reading Shakespeare's plays

Keep in mind is that a *play is not a novel*. What does this distinction entail?

- English Renaissance dramatists were not as preoccupied with the modern idea of **character** as we might expect. Characters can fall away from the plot with relatively little notice, or appear with just as little preparation. Their 'motivation' is based much less on psychological or biographical consistency than on cultural expectations for the roles in which they are placed. It helps, in this respect, to think of characters not as fully developed people but rather as 'types'—'the wise old counsellor,' or 'the scorned lover.' This is not to say that playwrights only make caricatures, but it does mean that your sense of how a 'character' acts needs to be somewhat flexible.

- Shakespeare wrote much of his drama in **verse**; these plays are much more like poetry than like prose. Moreover, this is a highly stylized, rhetorically-inflected verse. The culture in which Elizabethan drama emerged was extremely well trained in producing different kinds of speeches and arguments, and even a boy with only a 'grammar school education' would have memorized, translated, and imitated far more elaborate Latin and Greek models than all but the most advanced students do today. On account of this, much of the language appears quite ornate and presents some difficulty for us. Keep reading, keep consulting the footnotes; after a while, you will recognize more than you might expect. But don't just read 'for plot'; let the words trouble you, and try to approach them with the same attention and intensity as you would a poem.

- We tend to take for granted a degree of **realism or naturalism** in many of our prose readings today; even experimental narrative forms presume a familiarity with novelistic conventions. This is not necessarily the case with English Renaissance drama: fantastical events can happen; great lengths of time can be compressed into the short span of a few hours; and distances across the globe can be traversed between scenes. Sometimes even the characters themselves express incredulity at these almost magical developments. Remain open to the plot as it exists; reserve judgment about its 'believability.'

**Read the play closely.** The unfamiliar style, vocabulary, syntax, and stories require a great deal of attention. If you read the play in the same amount of time required to see it performed, you're going too fast. (Consider that the performance was not achieved in those two or three hours, but rather after a sequence of hundreds of preparatory hours of interpretation, memorization, and rehearsal.) Here are some suggestions to get you into the text:

- *Good reading is re-reading*; to this end, read the play at least **twice**. You might want to read through the entire play quickly at first, then look at the Norton introduction, and then read more slowly, with an eye for detail (note, for instance, what you have already forgotten since the first reading).

- Read the play **aloud**. You'll find that you won't be able to gloss over passages you don't understand, and will have to stop to figure out what they mean. You'll also get a better sense of the rhythms of the lines by getting them into your mouth—again, like poetry. For these reasons, we'll also be reading aloud a good deal in class.

- Keep an eye out for **patterns**—where have you heard this kind of speech before? why does this particular image keep re-appearing? Keep track of what happens in each scene—you might even want to add a kind of descriptive subtitle to each one ('Hamlet contemplates killing Claudius'). Make an outline of the plot; what would happen if certain scenes were rearranged? Read with a pencil in hand, and make note of anything that seems important, or confusing, or surprising. Review these notes before class.

Most importantly, **be curious**. If you don't understand a word, look it up in the footnotes, or better yet, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. If something doesn't make sense to you, make note of it, and bring it up during discussion. Check out the books in the Shakespeare section of the library; view videos of the plays in the AV center.

*In your essays, begin with questions you can't immediately answer, and see where you can go from there.*