

Shakespeare's Major Plays
(English 230-01)
Rhodes College, Department of English
Professor Newstok

Spring 2008
MWF noon-12:50pm
Palmer 208

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Palmer 310

Office hours: Tu 9:30-1:30, or by appointment (please *email*)

Course description

A participation-based course on Shakespeare's works, with special attention to the problem of **genre**, as well as some reflection 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 II*), middle (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Henry IV*, *Macbeth*) and later periods (*Henry V*, *King Lear*, *Tempest*), concluding with the generically mixed *Cymbeline*. 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 meanings of individual words to the continued influence of his works today. Final projects require considerable scholarly **research**. 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**. Read aloud, read slowly, and take notes. You should plan on **at least four hours** of preparation for every class session, and even more at the beginning of the semester. You must bring your **Norton Shakespeare** to each class.*

<i>Week of</i>	<i>Readings</i>	<i>Assignment</i>
Jan. 7	"Shakespeare" & "Major"	<i>Quiz on syllabus and Norton pp. 1-76</i>
Jan. 14	Sonnets & Close Reading	<i>Memorization of one sonnet</i>
<i>[Jan. 21—MLK Day—no class]</i>		
Jan. 23	Macbeth	<i>One word/OED exercise</i>
Jan. 25	*** MACBETH SYMPOSIUM—BLOUNT AUDITORIUM ***	
Jan. 28	Titus Andronicus	<i>Analysis of scene from Taymor movie</i>
Feb. 4	The Comedy of Errors	<i>Close readings of one line</i>
Feb. 11	Richard II	<i>Explication of one speech (25-45 lines)</i>
Feb. 18	A Midsummer Night's Dream	<i>Rhetorical tropes</i>
Feb. 25	Henry IV, part i	<i>Five-act progression</i>
<i>[March 3-7—Spring Recess—no class]</i>		
Mar. 10	Henry V	<i>Source study</i>
Mar. 17	King Lear	<i>Quarto vs. Folio versions</i>
<i>[March 21—Easter Recess—no class]</i>		
Mar. 24	The Tempest	<i>Shakespearean geography</i>
Mar. 31	Cymbeline	<i>Generic blending</i>
Apr. 7	Library research sessions	<i>Final paper proposals</i>
Apr. 14	In-class presentations of work-in-progress	<i>Annotated bibliography</i>
Apr. 21	Peer reviews	<i>Draft due</i>
May 2	Revised final paper due	!

Requirements

Engagement (20%) is mandatory, broadly conceived to include active **participation** (*listening and 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 weekly **quiz** every **Monday** will regularly gauge your engagement with the readings. Successful students are those who re-read thoroughly in advance of discussion, arrive on time to class, and participate thoughtfully every day of the semester. If you miss a class for any reason, your ‘re-admission ticket’ to the following class will be a short (300-word) typed essay on the single most interesting thing from your reading for the prior class. If *for whatever reason* (including medical and personal emergencies, extracurricular events) you miss **more than five classes** (that is, two full weeks of the semester!), you cannot pass the course.

Short essays (30%) are arguments (one **full** page, single-spaced—**around 500 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 (20%) will be undertaken by three or four 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. *See attached page.*

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: ‘C’ (70–79%) represents *satisfactory* work; a ‘B’ (80–86%) represents *good* work; a ‘B+’ (87–89%) represents *very good* work; an ‘A-’ (90-93%) represents *excellent* work; and the infrequent ‘A’ (94% and above) represents *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 formally composed correspondence.

Typical Week

Weekend	<i>Read play at least once in full</i>
Sunday night	<i>Email the instructor a representative passage for the quiz</i>
Monday	<i>Brief quiz; discussion of general issues (title; genre; themes)</i>
Tuesday	<i>Short essay due by 4pm</i>
Wednesday	<i>Focused discussion & 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>

Short Essays—guidelines

Short essays are 500-word arguments (one full single-spaced 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 entails a considerable amount of writing. 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 whomever 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 much 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 three or four 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. Each entry should give a brief (4-5 sentence) overview of the article, and evaluate its possible use for your fellow students.

- *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 Rhodes 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 10-15 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 on 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**; or listen to a **recorded audio version**. 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.