

ENG 323: Shakespeare Histories and Tragedies

Dr. Scott O'Neil

Course Times: Tuesday/Thursday, 11:00-12:15

Course Location: Liberal Arts Building 102

Office Hours: T/R 12:30-1:30 and by appointment

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Description and Objectives

From the rousing “band of brothers” pep talk Henry V gives his troops to Hamlet's tortured ruminations about whether “to be or not to be,” Shakespeare's histories and tragedies contain some of the most memorable moments in literature. But the line between history and tragedy is often blurred. Shakespeare rearranged history for his own needs as an Elizabethan writer, altering circumstances and making heroes and villains as he pleased. Some of the tragedies, in fact, contain nearly as much historical fact as the histories do. By examining a mixture of history and tragedy plays, we will be able to see patterns in theme and characterization that will better illuminate each genre. We will root our discussions in close reading, and I will also provide historical context to better investigate the ways in which Shakespeare uses historical narratives for his dramatic purposes. In addition to our exploration of these two dramatic genres, we will also explore the different ways to “do” Shakespeare. Not everyone engages with these plays in the same way or for the same reasons. In this course, we will explore several of Shakespeare's histories and tragedies, alternating our approach so that we view the plays as both objects of scholarly study *and* as texts that have been reinvented by performers thousands of times since their initial staging.

Required Texts:

- *King John* (Folger digital edition)
- *Henry V* (Arden edition)
- *Richard III* (Folger digital edition)
- *King Lear* (Arden edition)
- *Julius Caesar* (Folger digital edition)
- *Hamlet* (Arden edition)
- One blank marble notebook

All other texts and some secondary readings will be available through our course Blackboard page or (in the case of several videos) linked to our class page on my professional website.

Assignments and Grading

Your final grade in the course will be calculated as follows:

- 10% -- Participation/Preparedness
- 10% -- Commonplace Books

- 20% -- Short Responses
- 20% -- Performance project
- 15% -- Summation of an academic conversation
- 25% -- “Conference” Paper (8-10 pages)
- Optional Final Exam

Reading and Participation

The reading for each day is listed below on the syllabus next to the appropriate dates; please read, annotate, and think about the reading before the start of class. I would encourage you to bring notes or thoughts with you to facilitate discussion.

In order for us to have fruitful class discussions, all students are expected to come to class willing and eager to engage with each other and the course material. Continued failure to do so may affect your final grade in the course. Good discussion can come in many forms, but everyone should be prepared to ask anything (without hand-raising) and anyone can answer. Classroom discussions often can have one focus—the professor—but in the spirit of collaborative theater, I want us to be a community of multiple voices and conversations, so that we can all learn from each other.

Commonplace Books

Keeping a “commonplace book” was a standard practice for many readers in the Renaissance. The idea of a commonplace book was to keep a store house of phrases both elegant and useful. In short, it is a notebook of short lines from a variety of texts that speak to you in some way. Maybe they puzzle you. Maybe they inspire you. Maybe, as was the case once for a young Frank McCourt, a phrase just feels good rolling off of your tongue. I have asked you to acquire a blank marble notebook. During the semester, I want you to use that notebook to create your own commonplace book. You are required to add at least one phrase or sentence from each class meeting, but you are allowed to add more than one. Beneath each line, I would ask you to include a *short* indication as to why the line was included. I will collect these commonplace books on 11/26 and return them to you after Thanksgiving.

Short Responses

Short responses should be about one full typed page in length. Responses might expand on a class discussion; they might branch off and consider questions we did not have time to consider in class; they might consider a key image or passage that shapes your view of the work as a whole. Each response should focus on specific passages (or in some cases, one work) read for the course.

Because these responses are fairly short, you are not expected to fully develop and defend a complex thesis. This is your chance to further explore something that confused you or intrigued you about the reading in question – in a focused way. A good short response will lead to an interesting discussion in class. You will write four of these short responses over the course of the semester. There are no set due dates for these responses, however you can only submit one short response in

any given week. Over the course of the semester, you must respond to at least one primary and one secondary reading.

Performance Project

My instructions for this assignment are always, intentionally, somewhat vague. I want you to bring your own particular skill set to this assignment as you create a project that incorporates performance, the text, and a “wow factor” of some sort. In the past, students have interpreted this in a wide variety of ways, including:

- Re-writing scenes from a play for a modern adaptation
- Creating a white board animation of a key scene
- Composing and placing musical numbers for a musical adaptation of a play
- Creating a contemporary silent film production of a play
- Etc etc etc

We will have plenty of time as the semester progresses to figure out how you will each fulfill this assignment. The key is to link what you already do well to the concepts we discuss in class.

Academic Conversation

Each of you will sign up to give a brief presentation on a critical conversation connected to one of the readings throughout the semester. I will give you several resources and examples that should make this brief presentation relatively painless. 😊

Paper

Successful papers will develop an argument driven by your interests and connected to the themes of the course. Where the earlier assignments are designed to get you “thinking out loud” about your ideas and reactions to these novels, the paper should be a polished argument where you construct a claim, situate that claim within the scholarship on the topic, and support that claim with an analysis of one or more texts.

Final Exam

The final exam for this class is purely optional, though you need to “opt in” before the Thanksgiving break. If you opt to take the final exam, I will take your exam grade and average that together with your paper grade.

Policies

Contacting Your Instructor

I will be delighted to discuss your suggestions, ideas, and concerns about this course with you. You should feel free to drop by during my office hours, particularly if you enjoy tea. If those times are inconvenient, please e-mail me. I'm happy to make other arrangements. Please e-mail me in advance if you need to cancel an appointment.

The best way to contact me is via e-mail. **I will respond to all e-mails within 24 hours**, and I request that you show me the same courtesy. However, I am not permanently attached to my computer. **I do not generally check my e-mail between 10 PM and 10 AM.**¹ Please plan your electronic communications accordingly.

Written Work

All writing assignments should be typed and double spaced with one-inch margins. Please use 12-point Times New Roman font. All writing will be handed in electronically via email; **All assignments must be in .doc or .docx format, or I will not be able to open them.**

Please note! This syllabus constitutes a contract for this class. I will follow all of the policies I have set out in the syllabus. If you are still enrolled in this class by the end of the add/drop period, I will assume you have agreed to these terms and conditions.

¹ This is a lie, but you shouldn't really expect a response that late at night. ☺

Course Schedule

- 8/27 **T:** Introductions: Asimov and Giovanni, *Sealed With a Kiss*, IMDB, Tools and Resources, kinds of Shakespeare. Performance approach (Powerpoint on Tone and Subtext).
- 8/29 **R:** Read *King John* Act 1. Topic: Finding a concept.
- 9/3 **T:** Read *King John* Acts 2 and 3. Topic: Cutting the text (3.4.16-107).
- 9/5 **R:** Read *King John* Act 4. Topic: Staging and music (4.1 and 4.3).
- 9/10 **T:** Read *King John* Act 5. Topic: Costume and props.
- 9/12 **R:** Read *Richard III* Act 1. Topic: Scene comparison and staging deformity, staging wooing (1.2.34-284), and staging curses (1.3.14-on).
- 9/17 **T:** Read *Richard III* Acts 2 and 3. Topic: Staging succession and the citizenry (Act 2), contrasting evil and innocence—scene comparison (3.1), staging power (3.4), and staging piety (3.7).
- 9/19 **R:** Read *Richard III* Act 4. Topic: Murder in description (4.3), new marriage plots, and uprisings.
- 9/24 **T:** Read *Richard III* Act 5. Topic: The curious case of Richmond/Henry VII (4.1.45, 4.2.88, 4.2.98-110, and 5.1.1—Richmond's first appearance). Staging the ghosts and the final battle.
- 9/26 **R:** Read *Henry V* Act 1. Please read all six passages by the Chorus (incl. the epilogue). Read also two sections (your choice—see the sub-headings in the table of contents) from the excellent Arden introduction by T. W. Craik (pp 1-111). The function of the Chorus. Salic law and tennis balls.
- 10/1 **T:** Read *Henry V* Acts 2 and 3. Falstaff and the Eastcheap crowd. Tricky treason. War and the social classes. Once more unto the breach. Rhetoric of war vs. reality of war (Brooke vs. Wilfred Owen). Emergent Great Britain. 3.3 speech. French pun. Bardolph (3.6.19-112).
- 10/3 **R:** Read *Henry V* Act 4. A little touch of Harry in the night. French camp vs. English camp. Band of Brothers. Agincourt (prisoners, supply boys, calls for ransom, etc). Olivier vs. Branagh.
- 10/8 **T:** Read *Henry V* Act 5. Wooing scene and academic pursuit of “problem scenes.”
- 10/10: **R:** Read *King Lear* Act 1. Read also two sections (your choice—see the sub-headings in the table of contents) from the excellent Arden introduction by R. A. Foakes (pp 1-151). Textual Issues (Q v F). Love contest through exit from Gonoril's court. Edmund and RIII.

10/15 **No Class. Brockport's Fall Break.**

10/17 **R:** Read *King Lear* Acts 2 and 3. Stocked servant. Poor Tom (2.2.172-192). Reason not the need (2.2.453-475). The spatial change at 3.1. Howling at the storm, the trial of the daughters, and the Fool's final line. Out, vile jelly (3.7.82).

10/22 **T:** Read *King Lear* Act 4. The road to Dover. The miracle at Dover. Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra.² The bastard's two beds. Reunion of Lear and Cordelia.

10/24 **R:** Read *King Lear* Act 5. Also read excerpt from Bart Van Es' *Shakespeare in Company* (on Blackboard). Shortest battle ever (Sc. 1 and 2). The parade of trauma in 5.3 and its connection to the Gunpowder Plot. Absent Fool redux.

10/29 **T:** Read *Julius Caesar* Acts 1 and 2 (Opens with commoners, role of tyranny, gathering of conspirators).

10/31 **R:** Read *Julius Caesar* Act 3 (Murder and the mob of Rome—staging options). Please watch *Caesar Must Die* before next week's classes.

11/5 **T:** In class film: Phyllida Lloyd's all-female cast production of *Julius Caesar*.

11/7 **R:** In class film: Phyllida Lloyd's all-female cast production of *Julius Caesar*.

11/12 **T:** Read *Julius Caesar* Acts 4 and 5 (Death and the stories left behind).

11/14 **R:** Read *Hamlet* Act 1. Read also two sections (your choice—see the sub-headings in the table of contents) from the excellent Arden introduction by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (pp 1-138). Hamlet and Revenge Tragedy. Hamlet and Gertrude. Staging ghosts (Booth). Polonius advice (1.3.51-80--Gilligan). Hamlet and Ghost.

11/19: **T:** Read *Hamlet* Acts 2 and 3. Helicopter parents (2.1, 2.2). Madness (2.2)—read also the excerpt from Charles and Elaine Hallett (on Blackboard). Instructions to the players and final soliloquy (2.2). To Be or not (3.1.55-89—Olivier vs. Branagh vs. others). Observed rejection of Ophelia—what does Hamlet know here? (3.1). Staging the play within the play (3.2). Claudius's penance and Hamlet's delay (3.3). Hamlet, his mother, and the old man behind the curtain (3.4).

11/21 **R:** Read *Hamlet* Act 4. Aftermath (4.1 and 4.2). Claudius's execution plot (England—4.3). Ophelia's madness and Laertes's rage (4.5). Poison plots and drownings in art (4.7).

² Just seeing if you were paying attention. ☺

11/26 **T:** Read *Hamlet* Act 5. Grave diggers, the professions of the dead, Robert Armin, and a return to *Lear* (linking arguments—5.1). Burial of Ophelia. R and G are dead. Pivot to man of action (5.2.~200). Please read excerpt from Edward Vining's *The Mystery of Hamlet* (on Blackboard)—rebuttal by Edwin Booth. Watch silent film *Hamlet* (1921—link on Blackboard). What does Gertrude know and why don't we ever find out?

11/28: **No Class. Thanksgiving Break**

12/3 IN CLASS WORKSHOP TIME

12/5 IN CLASS WORKSHOP TIME

Last Day to hand in Short Responses

Exam TBD