

### Shakespeare: Major Tragedies

Our goals in this course are threefold. First, as our title suggests, we will explore Shakespeare's plays not simply as individual works, but as examples of a literary form, or genre—in this case, tragedy. We will start with some definitions of tragedy that were available in Renaissance England in order to see what tragedy may have meant to Shakespeare as well as to develop a model of tragedy's form and function against which we can test the plays we read. Our aim will not be to establish Shakespeare's orthodoxy, his adherence to a set of established rules, but to see where and how he followed, exploited, and violated generic conventions and—most importantly—*why* he might have done so. Second, we will investigate the plays' historical contexts: the social, political and legal events and situations in early modern England that influenced the plays, and which the plays in turn may themselves have attempted to influence. Finally, we will try to bring these two approaches together, seeing how contemporary circumstances might have shaped not only individual plays, but literary forms as well, asking which cultural needs the genre of tragedy might be responding to and what it might have to say to or about Shakespeare's England.

While this sort of inquiry will require a fair amount of attention to the past, equally important to our work will be its relevance to the present. Shakespeare's plays are, in sheer numbers of viewers, more popular today than they were in his own time; they speak to us from the stage, the screen (large and small) and, more than we may realize, our own mouths. Moreover, tragedy itself is still very much with us, in forms that are at once strikingly similar to and significantly different from those employed by Shakespeare. What does tragedy—Shakespearean and otherwise—say to us that it also said to its original audiences? What does it no longer say? And what might it say now that it has never said before? Learning to think about the function of literary forms like tragedy can teach us much about Shakespeare, and much about our own story-saturated world as well.

**TEXT:** *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al.

Close examination of Shakespeare's words will be essential to our work. *Please bring your text to class every day.* If you do not have the text, I will consider you absent.

**Note:** Shakespeare's plays are available in a variety of editions, some good and some quite bad. I recommend the *Norton* for a number of reasons: it is complete, (relatively) inexpensive, well-annotated, contains useful introductory material, and finally, it provides us all with a common text for easy line reference. If you wish to use other editions, please check them with me first.

## **ASSIGNMENTS:**

1. **Midterm:** Wednesday, March 9, in class. Identification and essay components. **15%**
2. **Final Exam:** Wednesday, May 11, 4:30-6:30. Identification and essay components. **25%**
3. **Research Project:** on a topic of your choice related to the concerns of the course, developed in consultation with me. The project will consist of three parts:
  - a. **Thesis Statement:** a thoughtful statement of intent at least three to four well-developed sentences long. Your thesis statement should present the argument you plan to make (though this may change as your research proceeds) and the sorts of evidence you will use to support it. Thesis statements will be returned with comments and graded ✓, ✓+, or ✓-; shoddy, late, or incomplete statements will lower your final paper grade by *at least* one increment (i.e. a B becomes a B-). Due Wednesday, April 6.
  - b. **Annotated Bibliography:** complete bibliographic entries in correct MLA format for at least five items (eight for graduate students) relevant to your project, along with brief descriptions (roughly 2-3 sentences) of the contents and utility of the items. Bibliographies will be evaluated on the correctness of the citations, the clarity of the annotations, and their potential usefulness to another researcher. While only five (or eight) entries are required, I strongly recommend that you list and annotate everything that you read for your own later use. Due Wednesday, April 20. **10%**
  - c. **Final Paper:** 12-15 pages in length (17-20 for graduate students). Papers should make use of at least four sources (seven for grads) in addition to the primary text(s) the paper addresses. Due Wednesday, May 4. **30%**
4. **Reading Questions:** Before we read each play, I will give you four or five questions that will inform our discussion of the play. All of the questions should guide your reading and preparation of the play, but you will also choose one of the questions and prepare a typed response, at least a page long (2 pages for graduate students), to be handed in on the day we begin discussing the play. Reading responses are meant to be exploratory and will be graded accordingly, but short or unthoughtful responses, or responses that indicate that you have not read the entire play, will not receive full credit. **12%**
5. **Participation/Quizzes:** Because this class will be conducted Socratically—that is, rather than giving you answers, I will teach you how to find them by asking questions and offering suggestions—your participation is essential to the success of the class, and thus a significant part of your final grade. Be sure to complete the assigned reading before each class, and come prepared with questions and comments. While your thoughts and feelings about the plays will always be welcome, successful participation in this class requires you to leave your “comfort zone” to answer questions that you may not have considered previously. If no one volunteers a response, I will call on someone. I prefer not to give quizzes, but if participation is low and you seem not to be keeping up with the reading, I will give them unannounced. **8%**

## **COURSE POLICIES**

1. **Attendance:** Because of our Socratic format, your attendance is crucial not only to your own success in the course, but to your classmates' as well. You are allowed two unexcused absences; each additional absence will reduce your final grade by two points. More than five absences are grounds for failure of the course.
2. **Late Arrivals:** Please be on time; late entrances disrupt the class. If you arrive after I have taken attendance, you are late. If you are late, it is your responsibility at the end of class to make sure that I mark you present. If you must leave class early, try to do so during our break, and please let me know that you will not be returning from the break so that we do not wait for you. Two late arrivals or early departures (or one of each) equal one absence. Also, as a matter of courtesy to your classmates, please try to avoid leaving and returning while class is underway unless the matter is urgent.
3. **Late Assignments:** Late reading questions will not be accepted—if you are going to miss class, you may submit your reading response via e-mail *before* the start of class (otherwise I do not accept work via e-mail). Late papers will be accepted without penalty only if you have received my permission in advance to turn the paper in late; otherwise, late papers will be penalized one grade increment (i.e. a B becomes a B-) for every 24 hours the paper is late, beginning at 4:35 on the day the paper is due. Likewise, missed exams must be discussed with me in advance, and may—or may not—be rescheduled at my discretion.
4. **Missed Handouts:** If you are absent on a day when reading questions or other information or materials are distributed, it is your responsibility to contact me to get what you missed. Not getting an assignment is not an excuse for not completing it on time and correctly.
5. **Plagiarism:** Plagiarism—representing the ideas or words of others as your own or presenting those words or ideas without proper citation—is a serious academic offense, whether intentional or unintentional. The *minimum* penalty for plagiarism in this class will be receiving no credit for the assignment in question; more serious instances may result in failing the course. This applies to *all* work for the course, whether formal or informal. See the Student Code of Conduct for a fuller discussion of the nature and seriousness of plagiarism.
6. **Classroom Deportment:** You will do *much* better in this class if you pay attention, follow along in the text, take notes, and participate in class discussion. Do not sleep, do work for other classes, talk to each other, or otherwise distract each other or me. Cell phones and other electronic devices should be turned off and put away. If you persistently violate these guidelines, your participation grade will be negatively impacted.
7. **Special Needs:** Please contact me privately to discuss your specific needs if you believe you need course accommodations based on the impact of a disability, medical condition, or if you have emergency medical information to share. I will need a copy of the accommodation letter from Student Disability Services in order to arrange your class accommodations, and without this letter I *cannot* grant you any special accommodations. Contact SDS in Willard Hall 101-04 if you are not already registered with them. SDS maintains the confidential documentation of your disability and assists you in coordinating reasonable accommodations with faculty.
8. **Office Hours:** Willard 303, Tuesday and Thursday 10:00-12:00, Wednesday 2:00-3:00, and other times by appointment. I am also available by phone (832-2751) and e-mail (cohens@ccsu.edu). Keep in touch!

## **TENTATIVE SCHEDULE OF CLASSES**

Note: I say that this is tentative because we will try to maintain enough flexibility to give more time to the texts and topics that interest us, and less to those that do not. Plays should be read in their entirety by the day we begin discussing them.

- Week 1:** 1/20: Introduction to Course and to Tragedy
- Week 2:** 1/27: *Romeo and Juliet*: Lovers and Fighters
- Week 3:** 2/3: *Romeo and Juliet*: Comedy and Tragedy
- Week 4:** 2/10: *Julius Caesar*: Whose Tragedy?
- Week 5:** 2/17: *Julius Caesar*: The Spirit of Caesar
- Week 6:** 2/24: *Richard II*: History and Tragedy
- Week 7:** 3/2: *Richard II* and Divine Right
- Week 8:** 3/9: MIDTERM
- Week 9:** 3/16: *Othello*: Comedy and Tragedy
- Week 10:** 3/23: SPRING BREAK: NO CLASS
- Week 11:** 3/30: *Othello*: Genre and Race
- Week 12:** 4/6: *Macbeth*: Tragedy, Responsibility, and Knowledge  
THESIS STATEMENTS DUE
- Week 13:** 4/13: *Macbeth*: The Natural and the Unnatural
- Week 14:** 4/20: *King Lear*: Tragedy and Suffering  
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES DUE
- Week 15:** 4/27: *King Lear*: Nature, Justice, and the End of Tragedy
- Week 16:** 5/4: Wrap-up and Review  
PAPERS DUE
- Week 17:** 5/11: FINAL EXAM, 4:30-6:30