

University of Utah  
ENGL 5710-001  
MW 3:00-4:20 GC 1560  
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**Studies in Renaissance Literature:  
Experimental Early Modern Theater**



**Course Description:**

Theater is delusional. Someone stands on a stage, and pretends to be someone else. They pretend those with whom they interact are other people too, and that they're all somewhere other than where they are. They pretend the words they speak are their own. They pretend they didn't say those words yesterday and won't say them again tomorrow. They pretend that the audience in front of whom they do all these things isn't there. That audience pretends to believe all this, and pretends not to be there as well. This is the tacit contract we enter into when we perform and watch live theater.

Such pretenses would have seemed absurd to the early moderns. In 1576, when the first London playhouse opened, it was (arguably) the first permanent theatrical structure in all of Europe in nearly 2,000 years. There were no rules to this thing. Professional theater was an exploratory enterprise,

actively working out its own grammar and its own genres, establishing the conventions we now take for granted, testing limits from which we have since retreated. Every single early modern play is an experiment, trying something that had never been tried before. Today, we read the works of authors like Shakespeare as “literature,” as timeless meditations on the human condition, abstracted from their historical and material contexts. Four centuries ago, one would scarcely have read them at all, because plays were not considered literary “works,” did not have “authors,” were seldom and poorly printed, and were experienced in instantaneous, organic performance.

We will try to recover their novelty and weirdness, by relegating Shakespeare’s to one voice among many – and by doing so, we will appreciate how weird his plays are too. This course offers a broad yet intensive survey of (mostly) non-Shakespearean Renaissance drama, in which we will read these plays for the fundamental problems they investigate about their own medium. What did it mean to use bodies, and stages, as sites of representation? What did it mean to charge money to participate in those representations? How did theater negotiate its relationship to literary tradition, to canons of religious and political power, to discourses of economics, nation, race, and gender, and to its own audiences? What is an actor? What is an author? What is a spectator? What is a character? What is a person? What, ultimately, is a play? Where does it happen? And how did the answer to that question eventually become “a book”?

**TL;DR:** Shakespeare is mainstream; this is the really deep, twisted, conceptual stuff. I offer it only once every few years, and through it, you will learn how to find the deep, twisted, conceptual stuff in Shakespeare too.

### **Required Texts:**

--David Bevington *et al*, ed. *English Renaissance Drama, A Norton Anthology* (2002)

**NB.** Much to my chagrin, this title appears to have recently gone out of print. You can still find it for sale in new or used condition, and are welcome to buy yourself a copy, but copies are getting scarce and prohibitively expensive. Accordingly, I am not requiring you to buy this book. We will discuss alternate arrangements when we meet for our first class.

--William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller (Pelican, 2016)

(This one is still in print and widely available; it is the only book I am requiring you to buy. It will be a few weeks before we need it, but you should order now to allow for shipping time. If ordering online, please make sure it is a match for **ISBN 978-0140714548**.)

--Selected primary texts, and all secondary readings (at least one scholarly article will accompany each primary text), will be made available for download in PDF format on the course Canvas page.