

University of Utah
ENGL 2300-001
MW 11:50AM – 1:10PM, BUC 208
Spring 2023

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Introduction to Shakespeare

This course serves as an accessible, low-stakes general introduction to Shakespearean poetry and drama for non-majors. We'll read six plays, drawn from across the three main genres in which Shakespeare worked – history, comedy, and tragedy – but here arranged into pairs bridged by common themes: **kings** (*Richard III* and *Henry IV Part 1*); **lovers** (*Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*); and **actors** (*As You Like It* and *Hamlet*). Because this is an English course, and because English at the college level is practiced differently from high school, our emphasis will not be solely on reading comprehension or emotional response; this is not a course merely in literary appreciation. Instead, we will concentrate throughout on developing the core skill necessary to illuminating literary texts – “**close reading**” – and to generating arguments about how they mean on a level deeper than the literal. Accordingly, we'll be starting with selections from Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, which show how close reading works within a field smaller and more manageable than a whole play. (Students experiencing difficulty with Shakespeare's early modern English, or with following the plots of the plays – which are sometimes genuinely confusing! – are thus *encouraged* to consult online guides such as Sparknotes. This is not cheating, since you'll quickly discover that plot summary is just a starting point, and bears little relation to how we discuss the texts in class.)

We'll find our time with each play short, and the deeper into each play we get, the more time we'll wish we had. That's good! The complexity of these texts can never be exhausted, and the best we can do is come to understand why. Indeed, we will gradually be *amplifying* that complexity, by approaching these plays not just as texts to be read, but as scripts to be acted. When we consider the interpretive choices that performance entails, we'll realize how many choices the texts make available, and how open-ended they are – and our reading will be enriched as a result. To that end, we will conclude the semester with **group presentations**, in which students (in groups of approximately four, depending on our numbers) choose a short scene or part of a scene from any play we've read, and perform it live in front of the rest of the class. More instructions will follow later in the syllabus, but **don't worry**: it will be easier, more rewarding, and more fun, than you think. And by then, you'll have read aloud so much Shakespearean language that you'll either feel comfortable with it, or you'll be used to feeling embarrassed, just like everyone else!

Required Texts

(THESE EDITIONS ARE COMPULSORY; BE SURE TO MATCH ISBNs WHEN PURCHASING AND TO ORDER AS SOON AS POSSIBLE FROM WHICHEVER BOOKSELLER YOU PREFER):

The Sonnets, ed. John Hollander (New Pelican Shakespeare, ISBN 978-0143131717) (**no need to purchase this title – I will supply you with PDF selections**)

Richard III, ed. Peter Holland (New Pelican Shakespeare, ISBN 978-0143130253)

Henry IV Part One, ed. Claire McEachern (New Pelican Shakespeare, ISBN 978-0143130208)

Romeo and Juliet, ed. Peter Holland (New Pelican Shakespeare, ISBN 978-0143128571)

A Midsummer Night's Dream, ed. Russ McDonald (New Pelican Shakespeare, ISBN 978-0143128588)

As You Like It, ed. Fran Dolan (New Pelican Shakespeare, ISBN 978-0143130239)

Hamlet, ed. A. R. Braunmuller (New Pelican Shakespeare, ISBN 978-0143128540)

N.B. Early modern books were printed haphazardly, with the result that modern editions, continuously dependent on subjective emendations, vary a great deal from one another. The New Pelicans are among the most affordable and best scholarly editions on the market: combined, they should cost no more than \$60 new, and a good deal less if in used condition (but be sure you're getting the correct edition!). Please **do not even consider substituting them** for older editions gathering dust on your parents' bookshelf from when they went to school, or for that single-volume collection of Shakespeare's works bound in cheap vinyl and based on an out-of-copyright edition from 1911 you can get at Barnes and Noble for \$25. The few dollars you might be able to save by doing so are not worth the aggravation of your never being on the same page as the rest of the class in discussion, and of your literally not having the same words on those pages. Please consult me if you have any questions.