

Shakespeare

English 5711

University of Utah

Spring 2025

Professor: Mark Matheson

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Texts: Due to the broad availability of Shakespeare's plays, I haven't ordered texts for this class. You'll need individual copies of the five plays we'll be studying or a "complete works" of Shakespeare. All texts must be in the original language as published in the late 16th and early 17th centuries—they must not be "modernized" versions—and they must be annotated by a modern editor. If you have questions about whether a particular publication of Shakespeare's work will be acceptable for this course, please consult with me.

Grades:

First four-page paper: 30%

Second four-page paper: 30%

Final five-page paper: 35%

Course Engagement: 5%

Please note: Extensive unexcused absences can, in themselves, lead to a lower final grade.

Course Schedule:

Week 1: Jan. 6-8 Course Introduction; I Henry IV

Week 2: Jan. 13-15 I Henry IV

Week 3: Jan. 22 I Henry IV

Week 4: Jan. 27-29 I Henry IV

First Paper Due: Friday, Jan. 31st

Week 5: Feb. 3-5 Henry V

Week 6: Feb. 10-12 Henry V

Week 7: Feb. 19 Henry V

Week 8: Feb. 24-26 King Lear

Week 9: March 3-5 King Lear

Week 10: March 10-14 Spring Break—no classes held

Week 11: March 17-19 King Lear

Second Paper Due: Friday, March 21st

Week 12: March 24-26 Coriolanus

Week 13: March 31-April 2 Coriolanus

Week 14: April 7-9 Antony and Cleopatra

Week 15: April 14-16 Antony and Cleopatra

Week 16: April 21 Antony and Cleopatra

Final Paper Due: Monday, April 28th, 2025

Course Notes:

Shakespeare was an astute observer and analyst of human societies. He had what we might call a sociological imagination, and he perceived very clearly that societies can be structurally very different from one another. He also had the historical sense, or an understanding of how different human societies can be over time and how each evolves under unique historical pressures. The development of such an understanding of history was a feature of the early modern culture of Western Europe in which Shakespeare lived and wrote.

This semester I've chosen five plays that manifest Shakespeare's understanding of how human societies function and how they influence the experience of their individual members. In part my motive for selecting these plays is the current condition of the United States, which for the past decade has manifested deep political and cultural divisions. I believe there will be particular value in reading these specific plays in the context of a divided nation: we can establish a critical dialogue between the content of Shakespeare's work and the unfolding political life of the present.

We'll begin with two plays from Shakespeare's sustained engagement with English history, "1 Henry IV" and "Henry V." These plays are set at the beginning of the 15th century, the late feudal period, and Shakespeare portrays in them an important moment in the process by which the English nation was formed. The social scope of these plays is inclusive; we meet not only the king and the court but the poor and most marginalized members of the society they represent. And Shakespeare has a sharp eye for the emergence of modern political practices still very much with us today.

We'll move on to "King Lear," which is set in pre-Christian Britain. Shakespeare's great tragedy represents a society in the throes of dissolution: things fall apart. Once again we encounter characters from all walks of life,

from the king and nobles to the “unhoused” and “unfed.” The crisis of the play’s society is at the center of Shakespeare’s work. There will be much more to say about it.

Our final two plays are drawn from Shakespeare’s engagement with Roman history. Shakespeare traced this history with great attention, from the overthrow of the Tarquin monarchy (c.500 BCE) and rise of the Roman Republic to the political upheaval of the first century BCE, which saw the end of the Republic and the establishment of the Roman Empire. “Coriolanus” is set in the early Republic, and perhaps no Shakespeare play engages more directly with class conflict, in this case between the patricians and the plebians, the haves and have nots of ancient Rome. We’ll conclude with “Antony and Cleopatra,” which represents the consolidation of a new political form, the Roman Empire, by Octavius Caesar, to whom the senate would later give the title Caesar Augustus. Henry V and Octavius Caesar are the two great historical winners among Shakespeare’s characters, and the plays in which they figure explore the reasons for their success—and also the costs.

Thank you for taking the course, and I look forward to our collective discussions and readings of these plays. This will be a process of discovery about both Shakespeare’s work and the political conditions of our own historical moment.

