

Helen (Lyn) Ward Page  
Oakton Community College  
lpage@oakton.edu

## **Advanced Studies in Shakespeare: Hero and Heroine**

This course focuses on six plays by Shakespeare selected from his histories, comedies, tragedies, and romances. The theme of the course is the hero or heroine, and the plays are studied from a variety of literary, historical, and critical perspectives. In addition to short papers, exams, and presentations, videos and recordings enhance classroom study of the material.

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## **Challenges and Pitfalls**

Many students who enroll in this course at Oakton Community College have completed either the Introduction to Shakespeare course or at least one other college-level literature course. This not only creates a positive classroom environment, but largely eliminates the problem of the "right answer" syndrome which often exists in the introductory course. Whether or not they have had previous Great Books exposure, students at this level are generally aware that both potential ambiguity and careful reference to text are hallmarks of serious literary study.

Small-group work can be a rewarding technique, as students generally come well prepared to each class session. The groups are each responsible for generating one factual, one interpretive, and one evaluative question on a portion of that day's reading assignment, and then posing their questions to the rest of the class. Other proven techniques include the use of short video segments, assuming parts and reading aloud in class, and attending performances as a group, if possible.

Even students whose previous acquaintance with Shakespeare has been slight often ask, while reading the third or fourth assigned play, "Isn't this one easier than the first few?" I always tell them that the plays haven't changed—they have. Their comfort level with Shakespeare's language, character types, and thematic material grows rapidly, and is particularly enhanced by a Great Books approach. The theme of hero and heroine has an enduring fascination and seems particularly appropriate for a somewhat advanced group, whose critical thinking skills can encompass the shifts and variations in these concepts across literary, historical, and cultural trends.

## Overview of the Course

### *Learning Objectives*

The objectives of this course are as follows:

1. Students will be able to identify and discuss in depth the conventions of Shakespearean comedy, tragedy, history, and romance, with reference to their origins in the classical drama.
2. Students will be able to recognize and discuss Shakespeare's techniques of characterization with reference to literary, historical, and critical perspectives.
3. Students will be able to explicate Shakespearean language with particular reference to figurative conventions, inversions, and archaic and classical references.
4. Students will be able to discuss and write about various aspects of the plays studied, synthesizing literary, historical, and critical materials to support their interpretations.

### *Methods of Instruction*

Three short (3-5 page) papers, three exams, one in-class presentation of a paper, and journal-keeping are required in this course. Teaching methods include lecture, discussion, collaborative work, student presentations, and other assignments which foster critical analysis of the subject matter. In addition, video clips from the plays studied are incorporated into many classroom sessions. As an optional activity, tickets will be available at a student rate to attend theatrical productions of Shakespeare in the area.

Students are asked to keep a journal, which may be handwritten or typewritten. This document is definitely evaluated on the basis of strength before length! Entries may vary from a paragraph to several pages, but there should be an entry for every class/reading session, and students may wish to organize entries around specific acts of each play.

### *Course Practices Required*

This course relies on the students' ability to read and understand assigned plays. Additionally, students will discuss and write throughout the course as they analyze primary and secondary source materials. Attendance and participation are expected, but not specifically graded. If assignments or tests are to be submitted/taken late, this must be discussed with the instructor ahead of time. Otherwise, the grade will be lowered one level (example: A to A-) for each calendar day late.

## Texts

The texts used in this course are Folger Shakespeare Library paperbacks from the Washington Square Press. The facing-page footnotes are unobtrusive and accommodate the styles of both experienced and novice readers of Shakespeare's plays. The following plays are read in this course:

*Henry V*

*Much Ado About Nothing*

*Twelfth Night*

*Othello*

*Macbeth*

*Antony and Cleopatra*

The theme of the course involves the character of the hero and/or heroine as portrayed in each of the plays. These characters encompass warriors, rulers, lovers, and characters who are combinations of all three. The final heroine of the course, Cleopatra, is identified by critic Harold Bloom as one of Shakespeare's finest character creations.

*Henry V* opens the course, with its title character, the greatest warrior-king in the history of England, previously known to those acquainted with the *Henry IV* plays as the unconventional young prince, Hal. As Henry prepares for the Battle of Agincourt, and in its aftermath, he is revealed as ideally suited to triumph over these difficult challenges. He has also been profoundly shaped by his earlier experiences, including those with Falstaff, whose death is reported early in *Henry V*. Falstaff is another character identified by Bloom as one of Shakespeare's best. The multiple "worlds" of this play include not only the familiar characters and diction of court and tavern, but also the four dialects and worldviews represented by the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish soldiers in Henry's army.

*Much Ado About Nothing* has dual heroine/hero characters in the delightful Beatrice and Benedick. The "skirmish of wit" between the two contrasts with the "world" of the watch manned by Dogberry and his minions. The landed gentry/military group also contains Don John, whose villainous actions reveal further dimensions to both Beatrice and Benedick, as the primary and secondary love plots move toward their respective comic resolutions.

*Twelfth Night* is often called a "dark" comedy, although its ending contains three promised weddings. Neither of the two "worlds" of court, represented by Olivia and Orsino, and disreputable dependents/servants, led by Sir Toby, is truly home to the Puritan character, Malvolio. It is his suffering at the hands of Sir Toby and his friends which raises one of the play's central problems. The play's self-possessed heroine, Viola, recalls Rosalind in her use of male disguise, and the unraveling of the plots involves such substitutions and gender confusions that love seems almost parodied in the play's final resolution.

The title character of *Othello* is the only one of the four great tragic heroes who is not a royal figure; his Aristotelian position of "high estate" is solely due to his prowess as a highly respected general. Here the issue of the tragic flaw, realization, and reversal are embodied in the events leading to the murder of Desdemona, and Othello's subsequent discovery of the deception practiced upon him by Iago. The initial grandeur of Othello's character reasserts itself in the final moments, producing the powerful tragic audience experience of pity, fear, and catharsis.

Like Othello, the protagonist of *Macbeth* is another of the four great titular tragic heroes. His progression from titled war hero to murdering usurper, and finally, to defeat through the fated elements decreed by the witches, tests our concept of the hero and his heroic qualities. As with Othello, interpreting Macbeth's tragic flaw is central to an understanding both of his character and of the larger issues presented in the play.

Finally, *Antony and Cleopatra* provides the second hero/heroine pair in this course, lovers who in this case are also powerful world rulers. Their mutual decline renders this play a tragedy, but also a romance, in its final sense of reconciliation. Octavius is denied the possibility of parading the captive Cleopatra as a Roman prisoner, but his admiration for her, and for the fallen Antony, is clearly expressed after their deaths. The complex relationship between these frankly middle-aged lovers has almost as much "infinite variety" as does Cleopatra herself, with the oppositions and symbolic qualities characteristic of the later romance plays.



# Syllabus

<b>Week 1</b>	Introduction to course
<b>Week 2</b> histories	Film and introduction to <i>Henry V</i> , Act 1
<b>Week 3</b>	<i>Henry V</i> , Acts 2 and 3
<b>Week 4</b>	<i>Henry V</i> , Acts 4 and 5 Test: <i>Henry V</i>
<b>Week 5</b>	Discuss Shakespeare's comedies
<b>Week 6</b> 3	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> , Acts 1–3
<b>Week 7</b> and 5	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> , Acts 4 Papers and presentations
<b>Week 8</b>	<i>Twelfth Night</i> , Acts 1–3
<b>Week 9</b>	<i>Twelfth Night</i> , Acts 4 and 5 Test: Comedies
<b>Week 10</b>	Discuss Shakespeare's tragedies <i>Othello</i> , Act 1
<b>Week 11</b>	<i>Othello</i> , Acts 2 and 3
<b>Week 12</b>	<i>Othello</i> , Acts 4 and 5 Papers and presentations
<b>Week 13</b>	<i>Macbeth</i> , Acts 1–3
<b>Week 14</b>	<i>Macbeth</i> , Acts 4 and 5 Test: Tragedies
<b>Week 15</b>	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> , Acts 1–3
<b>Week 16</b>	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> , Acts 4 and 5 Papers and presentations Take-home FINAL EXAM

## Theme

The course theme for English 235, Studies in Shakespeare, involves the characters and characteristics of the *hero and heroine*. In four of the six plays studied, there is a single such character: Henry himself in *Henry V*; Viola in *Twelfth Night*, although secondary attention may be given to Olivia and Orsino; and Othello and Macbeth, in these two great tragedies. In the other two plays, pairs dominate the action equally: Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and the title characters in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

The concepts of *hero and heroine* are not only thematic to the fabric of a given historical and social perspective, but are also susceptible to enormous variation, even within an established set of norms. Contemporary political figures forfeit their heroic stature with astonishing rapidity when the "tide in the affairs of men" turns against them, whereas some celebrities continue to be admired despite criminal allegations and activities. The hero and heroine figures in the plays studied in this course may be discussed from factual, interpretive, and evaluative perspectives.

In the factual realm, Henry V, Beatrice and Benedick, and Viola—and secondarily, Olivia and Orsino, Othello, Macbeth, and Antony and Cleopatra—are undeniably the protagonists of these six plays. The outcome of their various stories depends on the genre, and in two cases, on historical fact. The quality of each, however, leads to a less definitive area of questioning.

The interpretation of each as a hero or heroine depends partially, of course, on the very definition of these ideas. It is essential that the students construct these definitions in terms not only of their contemporary biases, but also as representative of the period and culture of each play. As just one example, Antony's suicide may be poorly executed, but it follows in the tradition of the defeated Roman warrior, and must be addressed in that context.

The evaluation of these heroes and heroines must similarly be accomplished within both personal and contextual discussions of the plays. As another example, do we admire Viola for her brash impersonation of the eunuch, or must we temper that admiration by remembering that women alone were simply unable to function independently in the culture represented by the play? How do we balance, examine, and enlarge our relationships to the heroes and heroines of our own time by carefully considering the heroes and heroines of these six 400-year-old plays?

## Sample Questions

*Foundation questions on the theme of hero/heroine:*

How do we define the hero/heroine as Renaissance concepts? As modern concepts?

How do we refine these definitions for each era as personal, social, and political concepts?

### ***Henry V***

*Factual:*

What past personal history of the younger Prince Hal has set the stage for the opening "tennis balls" scene of *Henry V*?

*Interpretive:*

How do the "worlds" of tavern characters and nationality characters enrich our understanding of Henry and his task at Agincourt?

How does the chorus illuminate the play for the audience? Was this device a particularly good choice for this text? Why or why not?

*Evaluative:*

Do we have soldier/politician hero figures today? Do they share any characteristics with Henry V?

Does Henry's awkwardness with Katherine seem believable? What conditions of his life might have contributed to it?

### ***Much Ado About Nothing***

*Factual:*

Do Beatrice and Benedick function as a hero/heroine pair? Your background materials identify them as romantic comic figures; does the text also contain elements of farce, of satire?

*Interpretive:*

How do the two "worlds" of the play interact to produce not only humor, but also plot complications?

Is Beatrice's injunction to "Kill Claudio" a surprise? How does it add to our understanding of their characters and their relationship?

*Evaluative:*

Do we encounter lovers like Hero and Claudio today? Like Beatrice and Benedick? How are these pairs alike, and how do they differ?

Does Beatrice resemble other Shakespearean heroines with whom you are familiar? How might you characterize their similarities?

***Twelfth Night***

*Factual:*

Malvolio is a Puritan; what Elizabethan historical conditions might have contributed to Shakespeare's portrayal and treatment of such a character?

*Interpretive:*

There are several candidates for hero/heroine in this text. Who would you place in one or more of these categories and why?

This text is often referred to as a "dark comedy": would you agree with this assessment, and if so, what elements seem to support it?

*Evaluative:*

Do the elements of coincidence in dress and resemblance diminish our enjoyment of this comedy as a modern audience?

How might Shakespeare be commenting on love as a phenomenon with the final resolution of his comic love plot(s)?

## ***Othello***

### *Factual:*

Othello is a "Moor of Venice"; despite his status as a heroic general, what role does his ethnic background play in his social relationship to all of the other characters in the play?

### *Interpretive:*

Desdemona defies her father; how does Iago use the comment that "She has deceived her father, and may thee," in his plot against Othello?

Is Othello's cashiering of Cassio in Act 2 believable? How might it contribute to his overall character development as a tragic hero?

### *Evaluative:*

Can we imagine a situation anything like Othello's today? Have you ever experienced or witnessed influence such as that wielded by Iago?

Does Othello's eloquence seem to fit his status as a warrior? Are there contemporary figures who also combine these traits? Why or why not?

## ***Macbeth***

### *Factual:*

Shakespeare knew how to please an audience; what do we know about Elizabeth's successor, James I, which influenced the choice of the plot and many details of this play, which was designed especially for the king's entertainment?

### *Interpretive:*

Some believe that Lady Macbeth is largely responsible for Macbeth's murderous actions. Do you agree? How does a close reading of the play's opening scenes support your interpretation?

How are Macbeth and Othello alike as tragic heroes? How do they differ?

*Evaluative:*

Macbeth is not only a murderer, but a usurper; how would King James and his contemporaries have regarded him, in terms of his social and political transgressions? Do we feel the same way?

The theme of madness begins to underlie the character development of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as the play progresses; does Shakespeare's portrayal of their conditions suggest modern parallels?

### ***Antony and Cleopatra***

*Factual:*

Since our hero and heroine are historical characters, how Shakespeare has modified them and their story to suit the requirements of the play?

*Interpretive:*

How do we perceive the hero/heroine qualities of Antony and Cleopatra? Do they seem more similar or different?

How is Antony's eventual disintegration as a leader mirrored in the play's language?

*Evaluative:*

Do we admire Antony and Cleopatra, respect them, censure them, pity them? Are they a "middle-aged Romeo and Juliet"? Why or why not?

Does Cleopatra actually defeat Octavian in the end? Are there elements of reconciliation in the plot which link this play to the later tradition of romance, as well as to the genre of tragedy? If so, what are they, and how do they enlarge our perception of the characters?



## **Sample Essay or Paper Topics**

The paper-writing assignments are centered on different textual aspects of the plays assigned. As noted above, the theme of hero and heroine may indeed underlie some of your writing, but it is not a necessary component of every paper.

## **Paper 1: A Scene Study**

Prepare a three- to five-page paper on one scene (e.g., Act 4, Scene 2) from either *Henry V* or *Much Ado About Nothing*. Create a thesis statement concerning the significance and function of the scene in the overall development of the particular play. Support your assertion with reference to the characters, actions, setting, and language employed within the scene. Your paper should include quotations from the scene itself, your primary source, and you may also use secondary sources.

A sample thesis statement for a scene from *Henry V* might be:

In the speech to the men of Harfleur, Henry counterpoints his earlier "Once more unto the breach" imagery with the ghastly horrors of total war, in order to promote not attack, but surrender.

Please use standard MLA format for all in-text footnotes, and supply a "works cited" page for all secondary sources.

## **Paper 2: Analysis of a Speech**

Prepare a three- to five-page paper on one speech of at least ten lines from either *Twelfth Night* or *Othello*. Discuss the speech in terms of who is speaking, who is listening, the setting and events surrounding the speech, and as part of your introductory paragraph, include a thesis statement concerning the overall function of the speech in the play. In addition, be sure to include a close reading which involves:

form of language—blank verse, couplets, some prose, etc.

figures of speech—metaphor, simile, personification, etc.

imagery—nature, classical references, color, etc.

diction—alliteration, assonance, etc.

A sample thesis statement for a speech from *Othello* might be:

Emilia is more than a foil for Desdemona, and finally suffers her own painful tragic realization.

Attach a clean copy of the speech—it may be photocopied. This does not count as one of your 3-5 pages! Please use standard MLA format for all in-text footnotes, and supply a “works cited” page for all secondary sources.

### **Paper 3: A Character Study**

Prepare a three- to five-page paper on one character from *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Macbeth*. Create a thesis statement concerning the character's significance and function, and support your assertion with reference to the character's "world" within the play, actions, language, and relationships. Your paper should include quotations from the play itself, your primary source, and you may also use secondary sources.

A sample thesis statement for a character from *Macbeth* might be:

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the world of the three witches adds both a supernatural and an inevitable quality to Macbeth's fate.

Please use standard MLA format for all in-text footnotes, and supply a "works cited" page for all secondary sources.

### **Secondary Materials**

The materials suggested here are all highly useful in providing background, as well as in "demystifying" the study of Shakespeare for students who may feel underprepared for this particular academic adventure. I always provide a biographical handout which includes the most recent research, as reported, for example, by both Michael Wood and Stephen Greenblatt. Most of what is now known about William Shakespeare and his world debunks the position of the Oxfordians and others who insist he was not the author of the plays. I encourage the class to briefly explore this notion, however, and they generally concur that Shakespeare's authorship is supported not only by much new historical and textual evidence, but also by the fact that a massive contemporary conspiracy would have been required had he not written the plays which bear his name!

In addition, I distribute a chronological listing of the dramatic canon. Students also receive synopses of the plots, since these were generally borrowed, and should form the basis for discussion, rather than discovery. Other handouts include lists of critical works and websites which may be useful for further study and research. I find that providing this degree of support is quite effective in helping students to feel more relaxed and empowered in their relationship to the texts themselves. One further note: it is particularly important, when teaching the histories, to discuss the period of each play and enable students to place Henry IV and Henry V in their historical context as figures of the late medieval period. The setting of these plays may then be better understood as a time when the enduring medieval social, political, and religious order was just beginning to shift toward the Renaissance values and ideals of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

### ***Some Recent Critical Commentary on Shakespeare***

Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004.

Wood, Michael. *Shakespeare*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

### ***Websites***

Websites which yield excellent information for any Shakespeare course may be found at:

**<http://ise.uvic.ca/Annex/ShakSites2.html>**

Among some of the better sites listed at the above address:

**<http://absoluteshakespeare.cam/>**

**<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/>**

**<http://www.bardweb.net/>**

**<http://ise.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>**



There is a fourteen-minute videotaped segment of a class session of English 235, Studies in Shakespeare, available through the website. The class is discussing Act 2 of *Othello*, and the segment centers on their responses to an interpretive question regarding the swift cashiering of Cassio—is Othello's action believable?

An interesting aspect of the video is the manner in which the discussion develops. First, students align themselves into two opposing camps: yes, Othello's action is believable, or no, it isn't. After about ten minutes of this, one girl speaks up who hasn't previously contributed. She creates a synthesis position which reflects not only the development of Othello's character at this point in the text, but also the relationship of this moment in the play to the elements of classical tragedy which are background material in the course. All, including the instructor, are suddenly aware that this feels like a "right" answer—although since we are employing Great Books methodology, certainly not the only one!