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Introduction to Shakespeare: Usurpation

This course studies six plays selected from among Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, and histories. The theme of the course is "usurpation," that is, the unsanctioned seizing of power on a political, social, or personal scale. Exams and three short papers are required in this course, and films and recordings enhance classroom lectures and discussions of the material.

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Challenges and Pitfalls

Some students who enroll in this course at Oakton Community College are planning to become certified as high school English teachers. Others are exploring the idea of an English major at the B.A. level with vocational goals in mind such as journalism, law school, or advanced literary study. This initial commitment to the course material creates a positive classroom environment which tends to persist throughout the semester. If students must drop for any reason, they tend to be apologetic and hopeful that they may enroll in the course again in the future. In addition, since English 101 competency is a prerequisite for English 234, students enter the course with college-level writing skills.

With such a receptive audience, it has not seemed necessary to use points, quizzes, or any other inducements to promote the completion of reading assignments. Students contribute to discussion, ask thoughtful questions, and refer knowledgeably to the text assigned for the day. One of the best techniques, other than classic Great Books questioning initiated by the instructor, is small-group work on segments of the reading, with a factual, an interpretive, and an evaluative question generated by each group, to be dealt with by the rest of the class.

A pitfall which occurs with even the most earnest class group is the "right answer"

syndrome. Although the explanation of Great Books discussion has warned students that interpretive and evaluative questions may have a multitude of answers, they may still find themselves uncomfortable with this degree of uncertainty. Shakespeare's language, character types, and thematic material all become familiar, but the experience of not "knowing" what to write in a paper or on an essay test may remain somewhat problematic.

As studies in critical thinking at the college and university level have demonstrated, freshmen and sophomores are particularly prone to this difficulty, since their high school education may have consisted largely in arriving at and memorizing the "right answers." Certainly the ability to tolerate and even relish ambiguity, while supporting a position with careful references to text, may be one of the most important things students learn in any Great Books course. In the study of Shakespeare, they become aware that they too may contribute to the ongoing 400-year-long discussion that has sprung from these wonderful works.

A final, if obvious, element to remember is the importance of seeing and hearing the plays. It is worthwhile to show short video segments as part of almost every class, and to attend performances as a group, if at all possible. At Oakton Community College we own the entire BBC Shakespeare series, which now includes many plays on DVD. This is the study of a kinetic, as well as a literary art form, and seeing a fine performance clarifies much about the material for all of us, as does the pleasure and challenge of periodically assuming roles and reading the texts aloud in the classroom.

Overview of the Course

Learning Objectives

The student will be able to:

- Identify and discuss the conventions of Shakespearean comedy, tragedy, and history plays, with reference to their roots in the classical drama.
- Recognize and discuss Shakespeare's techniques of characterization with regard to the protagonist, antagonist, foil, clown or fool, etc.
- Explicate Shakespearean language with respect to poetic conventions and literal and figurative meanings.
- Place the plots and themes of the plays studied in literary and historical perspective.

Methods of Instruction

We will meet twice weekly for discussion of assigned readings, viewing of film segments, in-class presentations, and exams. If theatrical performances of assigned plays are given in our local area during the course, attendance as a group or individually will be optional.

Course Practices Required

Come to class with assigned materials already read and prepared for discussion. Keep journal entries as you read. Three tests and a final and three 3- to 5-page papers will be required, as well as one in-class presentation of a paper. Detailed handouts on these assignments will be provided.

You should also 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 you may wish to organize entries around specific acts of each play. Please do not use this journal for factual notation or summary; keep such study notes and materials elsewhere. Your entries should be of an interpretive and evaluative nature, and you may wish to include questions of your own. Please feel free to bring your journal to class and pose these questions as part of class discussion and small-group work. The theme of usurpation may serve as background for your thematic material, but it need not be treated in every entry.

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 texts are read in this course:

Henry IV, Part One

A Midsummer Night's Dream

As You Like It

Hamlet

King Lear

The Tempest

These six plays are all among the foundational "greatest hits" of the Shakespeare canon. Each contains a version of the theme of usurpation of power within the social and political context of each play. Henry IV is perhaps the most obvious usurper among the six plays, as he removed Richard II from power and quite probably authorized his assassination. *Henry IV, Part One* also introduces the immortal character of Falstaff, identified by critic Harold Bloom in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* as one of Shakespeare's four greatest character creations. Two of the others, Hamlet and Rosalind, are also present in this course. *Henry IV, Part One* also allows the study of two distinct "worlds" within the play: the court and the tavern. Setting, diction, plot concerns, and character types may all be discussed within the context of these quite different but related "worlds." In addition, the young Prince Hal may be seen as the earlier incarnation of England's greatest warrior king, the title character of Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

A Midsummer Night's Dream moves the course into the realm of the comedies and continues the possibility of discussing usurpation, as it occurs in the purely imaginative "world" of the fairies. Other areas for consideration include the three "worlds" of lovers, fairies, and mechanicals, courtly and forest settings, and the delightful element of disguise which includes Bottom's tenure with the ass's head. The second comedy, *As You Like It*, gives us the issue of male/female roles in the disguised Rosalind—in Shakespeare's time, a male actor, playing a female character, disguised as a male character, who pretends to be a female character! Issues of power and succession are present in the person of Duke Frederick and his usurped brother, Duke Senior, who now lives in the idyllic forest that is the contrasting "world" to Frederick's court.

The two tragedies read in the course, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, are quite evidently related to the other selections through the usurpation theme. Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, is asserted to be a usurper by the ghost and becomes the focus for Hamlet's alternation between thoughts of revenge and meditation on its inverse, suicide. King Lear is, of course, the occasion of his own usurpation, through his treatment of his daughters during the opening scene of the play. Both of these great tragedies also provide occasion for studying the basic elements of tragedy as found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, such as the tragic hero, tragic flaw, dramatic irony, recognition and reversal, pity and fear, and catharsis.

The final play selected for this course is the late romance, *The Tempest*, which is sometimes taught as "Shakespeare's farewell to the stage." The play's hero, Prospero, also shares the experience of usurpation, having been supplanted as Duke of Milan by his own brother, Antonio. Elements of comedy are present, as well as the romantic aspects of masque, allegory, and antithesis, particularly in the characters of Ariel and Caliban. Contemporary issues that may be considered in evaluative discussions of this play include the strong female character of Miranda, who may be compared to Rosalind, and the possible criticism of colonialism through the vehicle of Caliban.

Overall, these six plays form a wonderful introduction to the genres, structures, character types, diction, imagery, and major themes of Shakespeare's plays. The theme of usurpation provides excellent material for discussions based on consideration of the texts, the students' opinions as supported by reference to the texts, and students' experiences of the world, as

illuminated by the texts.

Syllabus

Week 1	Introduction to course Film and introduction to history plays
Week 2	<i>Henry IV, Part One</i> , Acts 1 and 2
Week 3	<i>Henry IV, Part One</i> , Acts 3–5
Week 4	Exam: <i>Henry IV, Part One</i> Discuss Shakespeare's comedies
Week 5	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , Acts 1 and 2
Week 6	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , Acts 3–5 Papers and presentations
Week 7	<i>As You Like It</i>
Week 8	Exam: Comedies Discuss Shakespeare's tragedies
Week 9	<i>Hamlet</i> , Acts 1 and 2
Week 10	<i>Hamlet</i> , Acts 3 and 4
Week 11	<i>Hamlet</i> , Act 5 Papers and presentations
Week 12	<i>King Lear</i> , Act 1
Week 13	<i>King Lear</i> , Acts 2 and 3
Week 14	<i>King Lear</i> , Acts 4 and 5
Week 15	Exam: Tragedies <i>The Tempest</i> , Act 1
Week 16	<i>The Tempest</i> , Acts 2–5 Papers and FINAL EXAM

Theme of the Course

The course theme for English 234, Introduction to Shakespeare, is the idea of *usurpation*. The unsanctioned seizing of power can obviously occur on a political, social, or personal scale. In five of the six plays selected for this course, the usurpation is political. In *Henry IV, Part One*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest*, power has been seized from the king or duke prior to the

opening of the play, whereas King Lear gives away his lands and sets the scene for his later downfall in full view of the audience. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon feels that Titania's refusal to relinquish the Indian boy challenges and usurps his authority on both a social and a personal level.

The importance of the theme of usurpation may be examined from a factual, interpretive, or evaluative position. Historically, the periods during which Shakespeare's plays were written and/or set adhered to the medieval and Renaissance concept of the "Great Chain of Being." This Great Chain was headed by God, followed immediately by the ruler, whose authority came directly from God and was therefore his or hers by divine right. To usurp such power, particularly by laying hands on a monarch, was not only to disturb the political order, but in the medieval settings of many of the history plays, to commit a grievous mortal sin. Other plays may have fewer clear historical and religious boundaries, but still reflect the sense of the Great Chain in their regard for established political order.

Interpretive elements are present, however, in the reasoning behind the various usurping events. Henry IV, as one example, had the full support of a large number of nobles when he deposed "the skipping king," Richard II. This apparent justification did not prevent him from feeling a massive degree of guilt for his actions, the expiation of which is still central to an understanding of the character of his son, Henry V.

Finally, the evaluative material may begin by contrasting the perspective of Shakespeare's sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century audiences with the twenty-first century audience of today. How do we regard political usurpation as citizens of a democracy? Does the concept of usurpation exist for us on a social and personal level? How does our understanding of this concept for our own lives inform the meaning of these plays for us, today?

Sample Questions

Foundation questions on the theme of usurpation:

How do we define usurpation as a Renaissance concept? A modern concept?

How do we refine this definition for each era as a personal, social, or political concept?

Henry IV, Part One

Factual:

How do the words and actions of Henry IV throughout the play indicate the influence of the concept of usurpation on his life?

Interpretive:

How do the "worlds" of the play suggest the various aspects of Prince Hal's nature?

How does Falstaff serve as a window for the audience into the action and values of the play?

Evaluative:

Is honor seen today as a "mere 'scutcheon," as Falstaff suggests, or do we retain a larger contemporary concept of honor?

Is Hal's relationship with Falstaff similar to anything you have experienced? If so, how

did your relationship evolve and what is/was its value?

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Factual:

How does the concept of usurpation occur among the fairies, yet according to Titania, affect the "world" of the mortal characters?

Interpretive:

How and why does the text present several types of romantic love?

How do the traditional comic elements of magic and disguise illuminate and influence the textual commentary on love?

Evaluative:

Do we experience a variety of types of romantic love today?

Do the play's metaphors still apply, i.e., as Helena observes, is "winged Cupid" still "painted blind"?

As You Like It

Factual:

What are the two usurpations occurring in this text? How are they similar?

Interpretive:

How do the "worlds" of court and forest illuminate the plot? Do they function in a manner similar to or different from those "worlds" in *Midsummer*?

How do gender issues function in terms of Rosalind's character? (As an added detail, remember that she would originally have been played by a young male actor.)

Evaluative:

Does the play appear to make any ecological comments? Are these still applicable today?

Does the friendship between Rosalind and Celia seem similar to friendships between women today? If so, in what ways?

Hamlet

Factual:

How are intertwined political and personal usurpations the linchpins of this complex text?

Interpretive:

How do Hamlet's seven soliloquies function in terms of his vacillating state of mind as the text progresses?

How does Hamlet's treatment of women—Ophelia and Gertrude—provide added dimension to his character?

Evaluative:

Madness is a persistent theme in the text; how do we understand Hamlet's "antic disposition" and Ophelia's genuine madness in terms of contemporary psychology?

Since revenge killing is no longer the accepted concept that it was in Renaissance times, how does the play remain relevant for modern audiences?

King Lear

Factual:

How do Lear and Gloucester unwittingly contribute to the usurpations committed by their children?

Interpretive:

How is nature a thematic element, both as demonstrated by repeated textual references to "natural" and "unnatural" and by the plot device of the storm?

Madness is another theme in this work; how is it displayed through the characters of Edgar, as Tom O'Bedlam, and Lear himself?

Evaluative:

How do contemporary relationships between parents and children involve the problems explored in this text?

A related question: How do our lives contain the literal and figurative elements of "sight" and "blindness," as employed by Shakespeare in this text?

The Tempest

Factual:

Who are the usurpers and the usurped in this text? Does Prospero qualify as both?

Interpretive:

Do Ariel and Caliban function as parts of a whole, or does the text invite us to view them as qualitatively different characters?

How might Miranda be compared to other female characters studied in this course, i.e., Hermia, Rosalind, Ophelia, Cordelia?

Evaluative:

This play is often identified as "Shakespeare's farewell to the stage." If we agree that the text supports this interpretation, how has the playwright seen his relationship to his creations? To us, his audience?

If this play is classified as a romance due to its element of reconciliation, do we experience its conclusion differently from that of a more conventional comedy? If so, how might this difference be viewed dramatically? Psychologically?

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 usurpation may indeed underlie some of your writing, but it is not a necessary component of every paper.

Paper 1: Analysis of a World

Please prepare a three- to five-page paper on one of the two worlds (tavern, court) in *Henry IV, Part One*, or on one of the three worlds in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (mortal lovers, fairies, mechanicals). Develop a thesis statement based on the primary function of that world in the play. Comment on settings, characters, and language, as well as elements of plot, to support your thesis. Please use standard MLA format for all in-text footnotes, and supply a “works cited” page for all secondary sources.

Paper 2: Explication of a Speech

Please prepare a three- to five-page paper on one speech from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Choose among the listed speeches which we have not explicated in class, and photocopy or type the speech as an attachment (not as one of the 3–5 pages) to your paper. Explain who is speaking, who is listening, and the setting and events surrounding the speech, and create a thesis statement concerning its overall function in the play. In addition, be sure to include a close reading which covers the:

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

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

imagery—nature, classical references, etc.

diction—alliteration, assonance, etc.

A sample thesis statement might be:

In the first soliloquy, the imagery and figurative language support Hamlet's feelings of desolation and revulsion at this point in the play.

or

In this speech, Polonius attempts to promote his own importance by treating Hamlet to yet another series of well-worn, self-conscious puns.

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

Paper 3: Analysis of a Character

Choose from among the following characters in *The Tempest*:

Prospero

Miranda

Ariel

Caliban

Explore the way that Shakespeare develops the character in terms of relationships with others, plots events, and language. Perhaps the character has a symbolic rather than a realistic function, or is one part or aspect of a larger symbolic construct. As always, three to five pages, with standard MLA format and “works cited” page, are required.

Secondary Materials

The materials suggested here are all highly useful in providing background, as well as "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 Shakespeare's 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.com/>

<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!