

Ann Wilkinson
Santa Barbara City College
Wilkinson@sbcc.edu

Intro to Shakespeare: Transformations

This course introduces students to three major genres of Shakespearean drama: history, tragedy, and comedy. A thematic organization of the course based on the idea of “transformations” encourages reading and interpreting the plays from the perspective of changes that characters undergo—and changes in Shakespeare’s own worldview as well.

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Theme

This course is organized for more advanced community college students under the rubric of “transformations.” Transformations in these plays come about for a number of reasons. Primary among these reasons is that Shakespeare is preeminent in creating inner lives for his characters that are complex and evolving as they react to events. Another reason, however, for these transformations is that the context of Shakespeare’s world gives impetus to them: the Copernican revolution, the Machiavellian influence, geographic exploration, and dynamic social change. So various characters may display a Machiavellian doubleness, or are concerned with the dismantling of the received Elizabethan worldview and its replacement with a modern, science-based sensibility or with a nihilistic outlook. Conventional ideas of romance are sometimes replaced by a modern “marriage of true minds” sensibility.

By “transformations” I mean a number of important things: the transformations that were taking place in Shakespeare’s time, in political theory, science, religion, medicine, and many other fields, all of which influenced his thinking and his work; the transformations which he, perhaps the first in literature, made the basis of his most important character developments; and, not least, the transformations that take place in students who engage wholeheartedly with the marvelous works before them. It might be wise to add that transformations take place constantly in the thinking of the instructor, as the works over

time yield more and more profundities. It is a truism that as a person changes herself or himself, the works also become other for them than they were, but it perhaps should be stated anyway, for if this is ever true, it is certainly true with the study of Shakespeare.

Let's start with the students' transformations. While a few students "have to take the course" for an English major who don't particularly want to, most students in this course are there voluntarily. This does not mean that all are ready for the demands of such a course (one of the problems mentioned below), and no doubt they are hoping it won't be too hard. Beyond that, and with mostly unsuccessful junior and senior high school experiences behind them, they don't know quite how this course will transform them, if they open themselves to the works.

The first and most obvious way in which the study of Shakespeare's plays transforms students is his language, his poetry, which radically alters their ideas of what language can do. Many have only the rather limited language that popular culture affords them, as they have not been serious readers to this point. That language, while often very lively and in constant creative flux, is still limited in many ways. But there seem to be no limits on Shakespeare's language: it is innovative, inclusive of all registers, brilliant in expression. It amazes students to find that many of the expressions they use and are familiar with are Shakespearean in origin. This may be their first realization that his works are a wellspring of the language, contributing abundance, flexibility, precision, and almost every other encomium one wishes to add. Consequently, working with the texts is an opportunity every day for delight and discovery.

What Shakespeare has to express is also brilliant: his understanding of the whole human comedy and the whole human tragedy. Harold Bloom has famously attributed to Shakespeare "the invention of the human." While for some this may seem to be an absurd claim, I don't find it so, in the sense I understand it: that before Shakespeare, none of the great works of literature presents us with characters whose interiority claims our deepest attention. We see in his plays so many characters who are in the process of reacting to events and shaping themselves before our eyes, in ways no other characters in literature before Shakespeare could do, because assumptions about character were different. Earlier characters had personality structures, and they of course reacted to events, but we don't see process and developing understanding in them. Their characters and personalities are givens. We don't have, in short, interiority. With Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and Lear especially, we have this interiority which has become so much a part of our way of understanding human beings. Thinking about this and reflecting on it is transformative for students at this point in their education.

The themes and ideas that are everywhere in Shakespeare open a door for students that can provide practical and philosophical benefits for life. Every important human subject is touched on: the varieties of love, jealousy, hate, power, powerlessness, belief, nihilism, selfishness and generosity, fear and courage, to name only a few items on this list. Shakespeare's texts have been used in high-level business programs, for example, to examine the issues of intimidation, negotiation, ethics, manipulation, and other problems of that world. Shakespeare's rhetoric has been used by governments to raise patriotism in perilous times, as it was in England at the time of the Second World War, and as the St. Crispin's Day speech is used to this day. But his texts are also used to examine the reasons why human beings go to war, their motivations often shown to be very mixed and often cynical.

This catalogue is practically endless, but reaching even some of these in the course of teaching these texts transforms the thinking of serious students, who at the very least will know that rhetoric and language need to be carefully parsed and reflected on.

It is critical, in my view, to establish the background of the transformations that were taking place in Shakespeare's time. The plays and sonnets reflect the changes of the second half of the sixteenth century. The Copernican revolution was in progress and led to questioning of the traditional cosmology. Metaphysical questions arise: is man, as Hamlet insists, "like an angel. . . like a god," in his created (though corruptible) nature; or is he, as Lear in a more nihilistic mode says, a "poor forked thing," not resembling the divine at all but merely an aspect of nature? Does Shakespeare believe that nature is that divinely ordered system of hierarchies that was long the received philosophy, or does he understand that Edmund's "thou Nature . . . my goddess" is really an appeal to a nature which, as a later poet said, is red in tooth and claw? I think the answer is that Shakespeare understood very well the philosophical transformations that flowed from the Copernican revolution, and while his heart may have resisted them, his mind certainly apprehended these changes, and they inform some of the contrapuntal structure of many of the plays.

Machiavelli's writings, often in bastardized versions, were becoming popularly known. Crude Machiavellian figures had appeared in plays earlier than Shakespeare, often superimposed over the medieval Vice figure. But the real import of these writings was that they called into question the whole social and political teaching that had been received for many centuries. Shakespeare understood perfectly what the real (not the cartoon) Machiavellian techniques were. Is there a more Machiavellian prince than Henry V? For all his rhetorical magnificence (itself a suggested Machiavellian technique), he is looking for ways to go to war, perhaps to "busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels," and he has found that he can manipulate everyone with his threats: they will be to blame if their grandsires and grandchildren, wives and daughters, are ravaged and slaughtered, because they have not yielded to his demands. In true Machiavellian fashion, the technique of using threat and guilt always work for him.

While none of this is new in human behavior, what is new is that it has been formalized and published, and now becomes a way of thinking—very ardently resisted, of course, by those in power because their anointed tenure is now questioned. A new realism is being voiced, and Shakespeare imports it into his plays.

Shakespeare creates more autonomous and powerful women than had ever been done before in Western literature. They are intelligent, witty, full of life: Rosalind, Cleopatra, Portia, and Beatrice (to be fair, the Wife of Bath should be mentioned as a predecessor). They react out of their own centers of being to the events around them. The women may use their power for good or ill—Lady Macbeth obviously for ill—but their strength is undeniable.

Of course, there are weak women as well, like Ophelia, but the point is that there is such an abundance of these new autonomous and thinking women. And they read! They are often seen with book in hand or contemplating and writing poetry. While many women in Shakespeare's time did read, what was provided for their reading was mostly limited to religious or household advice. But Shakespeare gives us a Rosalind and a Beatrice who can actually read the same books as men do, and who sparkle all the more for it. Needless to say, this too is a transformation in thinking, though it was very long indeed before the rest of the world caught up with it.

From these several points of entry, and more besides, the theme of transformations provides an abundance of riches, of information, knowledge, understanding, and profound appreciation.

Teaching Practice

In this course, because of the voluminous materials to be digested, traditional methodologies are used, combined with more recent pedagogies. At the beginning of the course I give a lecture outlining some of the transformations outlined above, as well as providing context on a variety of subjects relevant to understanding Elizabethan and Jacobean life. Some visual materials supplement this lecture.

At the beginning of each play, I give a short lecture on the place of the play in Shakespeare's development, on the issues it raises, and most particularly on the theme of the course. Every play contains its transformations, and every play transforms students' thinking, deepening and enlarging it. That short lecture done, we start on the text of the play or the sonnets. We do a fair amount of reading of the text, with more and more students volunteering to read scenes, which is itself an achievement, since typically students have had bad experiences in reading aloud and are afraid even of contemporary texts. To volunteer to read Shakespeare, in my view, represents a great advance in confidence and comfort levels, as well as evidencing a delight in the language. After each of the selections is read, we discuss its possibilities: what aspects of transformation a particular scene contains, what ambiguities, and what revelations. At this point, any questions as to textual meanings are answered. It is always a pleasure to have students feel more and more free to ask these questions, to show themselves more and more willing to engage with the texts.

It seems incontrovertible to me that Shakespeare's plays must be seen as well as read, so as time allows we do look at all or parts of filmed versions, sometimes contrasting a pair of scenes from an earlier acting style like Olivier's with a recent more naturalistic version like Branagh's. This practice has several advantages: it not only "makes it more real," as the students say, but they become aware that each generation has its way to perform Shakespeare, which is part of his universality.

Students can opt for some grade points to memorize one or more sonnets—most of us remember with pleasure that we have committed some Shakespeare to memory—and quite a few do this. In addition, a group activity may be to devise an original presentation of an act or a scene from one of the plays, in any form the students can create. This is usually done at the end of the semester and is both enjoyable and engaging.

Midterm exams are given at several intervals, and a final exam as well. A research paper is part of the course requirement, and individual conferences are necessary to focus the subject.

Problems and Solutions

1. *Problem:* The main problem in teaching this course is that Shakespeare's language seems to be a barrier at first, as is quite understandable.

Solution: There is no radical solution to this, but using assurances and taking time to go over the text with the class can assuage or mitigate the students' anxiety and so begin to break down the barrier. I assure them that I am still learning the meaning of parts of the text that I have read for years, because that is the nature of this level of poetry. But whatever entry point they have is fine: we will go on from there.

2. *Problem:* Lack of knowledge and context. For example, there are thousands of "medical" references in the plays, usually based on Galenic medicine and the theory of the humors.

Solution: Since the references provide a consistent metaphor system in the plays, context must be provided, either by the instructor or by an individual or group report. This information generally appeals to students, perhaps because from their modern medical experience it seems so very bizarre.

Other subject matters also need to be contextualized in this manner, whether of explanation of Othello's military background and how it sorts with his presence in Venice, the purgatory that the Ghost is sent from into Elsinore, or many other such topics.

3. *Problem:* Writing about the plays. Using the texts to support argument and interpretation is still fairly awkward for our students, as so much of their earlier writing dealt with subjective responses.

Solution (if there is one): I am hoping that this experience with Shakespeare will help usher students into the discourse of the educated, where opinion should be supported if it is not to be discounted. I give models and discuss their value with the class, and ask that they use the models to begin to write at this level.

4. *Problem:* Getting students to spell "villain" properly, since they have to talk about villains all the time! This is a bit of a joke, of course, but I do want them to be precise in their language if they want to be taken seriously.

Syllabus

Texts

Individual Folger editions of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets are used. The students may use a complete edition of Shakespeare if they have one, but they must then deal with slight variations in text and with pagination. The following works are read in the course:

Richard III
Henry V
Hamlet
Othello
Selected sonnets
Much Ado about Nothing

Course Schedule

During the course of our sixteen-week semester, we will read five plays and a selection of sonnets. This is a concentrated and fairly intense set of readings, but a grounding in Shakespeare requires a good acquaintance with the major works. Ideally, Shakespeare should be taught in a series of consecutive courses so that all thirty-six plays could be read and discussed. This is possible only in rarefied circumstances, so I have chosen major works from three categories, as offering the best representation one course can achieve: history, tragedy, and comedy. The course is arranged in a roughly chronological plan, so far as is

consistent with attention to Shakespeare's practice and technique in the various genres. The course schedule is as follows:

Week One	Introduction <i>Richard III</i> , Acts 1, 2, 3
Week Two	<i>Richard III</i> , Acts 4, 5 Film
Week Three	<i>Henry V</i> , Acts 1, 2, 3
Week Four	<i>Henry V</i> , Acts 4, 5 Film
Week Five	<i>Hamlet</i> , Act 1 MIDTERM EXAM
Week Six	<i>Hamlet</i> , Act 2
Week Seven	<i>Hamlet</i> , Acts 3, 4
Week Eight	<i>Hamlet</i> , Act 5 Film
Week Nine	<i>Othello</i> , Act 1 MIDTERM EXAM
Week Ten	<i>Othello</i> , Acts 2, 3
Week Eleven	<i>Othello</i> , Acts 4, 5
Week Twelve	<i>Othello</i> Film MIDTERM EXAM
Week Thirteen	Selected sonnets (1st half of handout)
Week Fourteen	Selected sonnets (2nd half of handout)
Week Fifteen	<i>Much Ado about Nothing</i> , Acts 1, 2, 3 RESEARCH PAPER DUE
Week Sixteen	<i>Much Ado about Nothing</i> , Acts 4, 5 Film Group presentations

Grading

Grading will follow this template:

Midterm exams	100 points each
Research paper	200 points
Final exam	200 points

Extra credit possibilities will be announced regularly, as there is a wealth of Shakespeariana to choose from, including a great number of films.

Research Paper

Shakespeare's plays and sonnets offer a wealth of possibilities for research. In the course of 400 years, many thousands of topics and themes have been examined, so it is not intended that you find a subject that has never been looked at. What is intended is that the work you do comes out of your own interest. Under no circumstances should your paper be an assemblage of others' critical analyses. Secondary works must be used only for support of your own ideas and argument, which must arise out of the discussions centered on the course theme, "transformations."

The paper may take one of several forms: (1) you may wish to explore an area of importance for the context and theme of the play you choose; or (2) you may examine the play or plays themselves in depth to analyze and interpret a particular topic or theme. In the first case, you might explore, for example, the nature of the military background in *Othello*, to show what light your findings throw upon character and action in the play, and how we can understand the transformations that occur in a more textured way.

Or you may wish to look at the condition of women and their marriage issues in *Much - Ado about Nothing* or *Othello*. Your point will always be to show how understanding an element of the context allows us to understand the play better in terms of the theme that organizes the course. If you take this option, you may limit yourself to one play or you may choose to explore the topic in several plays, say a comedy and a tragedy.

In the second case, you will focus primarily on the language of the play or plays themselves. You may wish to look at the language of class, for example, or of patriotism, or of racism, or health and disease. You may look at the topic of "nature" or "love" or fidelity: what it means as a theme in a play or plays, and what metaphors or other language display that theme, and above all how this material illuminates the course theme, "transformations." In this case your primary materials are the plays, and the secondary materials, other works of scholarship, are to be used as support. *They are not to be used in place of your own interpretation, but only as support for your ideas. Your paper will suffer seriously if you borrow too extensively from any source, even with citations.*

The following are some sample topics, all of which incorporate and relate consistently to the course theme of "transformations":

- Women as Property (context and/or metaphor)
- Metaphors of Witchcraft and Magic in _____
- The Machiavellian Theme in _____
- The Idea of Masks in *Much Ado about Nothing* (or others)
- The Language of Race and Its Background in *Othello*

The Opposing Ideas of “Nature” in _____
Beauty and Fidelity in _____
Iago and the “Tribe of Hell”
Othello as Tragic Hero, or as Victim
Kinds of Jealousy in *Othello*
Hamlet: The Hero’s Flaws
Hamlet: Ophelia’s Madness: What Causes It?
Time and Eternity in the Sonnets
The Poet’s Self-Concept in the Sonnets

These are just examples, of course; there are thousands of possibilities in these very rich works. I will meet with you to discuss your choice of topic.

Your paper must be between six and ten (6–10) pages (or somewhat longer if you need more length). Use at least three to five supporting or secondary sources, and use MLA format for citation. Look at the proper ways of citing act, scene, and lines, and the proper ways of quoting, whether indented or in-text. Titles of plays are either underlined or italicized (be consistent with the method you choose).

The paper will have a value of 200 points (double the midterms). Fullness of content and clarity of presentation will be the bases of your grades for this paper.

Finally, I do adjure you to cite your sources accurately. As you know, failure to cite leads to issues of plagiarism. Of course, the paper must be strictly your own, with secondary support. The use of papers done by others is plagiarism, and must result in an F for the course.

Study Guides for Exams

Hamlet

Remember the theme of the course, “transformations,” and keep it in the forefront as you consider the following. What are the great themes and motifs of the play? Consider among them:

1. Appearance vs. reality
2. Spying: who is “observed” and why? How does this relate to meaning in the play? Is Hamlet transformed into being a spy? How does this affect him?
3. Images of corruption: what do they imply? Is the world now transformed into an infected one, a corrupted one?
4. The function(s) of the soliloquies: do they show transformations in progress?
5. The ways in which the play itself plays with the idea of the play (theater metaphors). (Remember, the theater itself is a medium of transformation.)
6. Hamlet as hero; Hamlet as “villain”: is he transformed into one or the other, or is it ambiguous?
7. The powerlessness(?) of the women: have they got a chance to become powerful?

8. Is the world (Denmark) saved in the end? If yes, by what means? If not, how do we know this? And why is it so?
9. Images from the military, among others “mining” and exploding: is this world in process of imploding?
10. Memento mori: how does it have meaning in the play? How does it change one’s perceptions?

Othello

Think about the following topics in reviewing the play for your exam, and keep the course theme of “transformations” at the forefront:

1. The metaphors which rule the play and that show this world in transformation.
2. The enlightenment or lack of enlightenment that occurs by the end of the play.
3. Anti-feminism, if such exists, in this play; is it ever “transformed” so that it is modulated? If not, why not?
4. The degrees of interiority that we find in the central characters.
5. Questions of honor: what honor means to these characters, and who cares about it; if it is lost, what transformation takes place.
6. The attitudes the play displays on sexuality: are they transformed in the course of the action?
7. Nihilism as a conclusion in this play: is the “sane” world of Venice restored at the end, or has a transformation taken place?
8. What weaknesses do the central characters display that lead to their ruin or death?
9. Pathos in this play: how effective is it? How does it serve the purposes of the play? Is it transformed into real tragedy?
10. The ending vision: is order to be restored? Can that order, if there is to be order, incorporate the knowledge of the fallen world that the play has revealed?

Richard III and Henry V

I will ask you to write on one passage from each play from the options I will give you. (I will give you the passages themselves to choose from.) The course theme must be present in your formulations. Among the elements you should be able to address:

1. The rhetorical devices or effects used for specific purposes (to persuade, exhort, boast, etc.).
2. The complexity or simplicity of the speech as revelatory of character or personality.
3. Metaphors and other figures of speech as they show character being transformed.

4. Larger themes that are reflected in the characters' speech (for example: the presence of evil, the need for war, the making of history, the role of revenge, etc.), and how these themes reflect a world in process of change and transformation.

Sample Exams

Hamlet

Choose *one* of the following topics. In all cases specificity is required: direct reference to the play's events and language. And you must make the connection to the course theme, "transformations."

1. Hamlet says he has "lost all his mirth." What are the reasons for his "distemper"? What has transformed him?
2. Fortinbras says that Hamlet would have proved "right royal": in what ways can you support this statement? Would he have to be transformed to become "right royal"?
3. How is Hamlet a "hero"? Does he become one, or does he lose his heroic nature because of his flaws?
4. The language of infection, disease, and contagion, and variants of these metaphors, is powerful in the play. What meaning can we attach to it? Has the world undergone a transformation, and if so why?
5. Is Hamlet a sacrifice? What transforms him from a grieving son into a sacrifice? Be specific in your argument.
6. In what ways is the world of Denmark a "garden," and what kind of garden is it? Has it "fallen," and what is the evidence for that?
7. Hamlet says he "know[s] not seems." What does this statement relate to in the play?
8. In what way is the idea of "theater" drawn upon in this play? How is it used for transformative acts?

Othello

Choose *one* from the following topics, keeping the course theme of "transformations" in the foreground:

1. The "tragic hero": this play has a central figure around whom the tragedy is built. In what ways is he "tragic," and in what ways "heroic"? Does the Aristotelian concept of *hamartia* (later called the "tragic flaw") apply to him? If it does apply, does it lead to the concatenating events of the tragedy and to his death?
2. Sexuality is a striking component in this play. What is the defining characteristic of this component? In what ways positive, if any? In what ways negative? Be sure to examine the language that expresses this element for metaphor, tone, diction, etc. Are any of the expressions transformative for good or for ill?

3. How does the central character take up the question of his “honor”? What does he mean by it? How does his understanding of it affect his actions and his sense of himself?
4. Where do you see pathos in this play? Is pathos effective in this tragedy, or does it distract from the greater design? At what point does it become transformed into tragedy?
5. Metaphors in this play fall into distinct groupings. Identify those groups and discuss how the metaphors are significant, especially as they show us a world in transformation.
6. Define the kind of villainy we see in this play. It has once been labeled “motiveless malignancy.” Do you agree with this label at all? If not, why not? Is Iago simply evil, or is he transformed from a practical soldier into a malignant plotter?
7. What are the distinct meanings of the concept of “nature” in this play? Which concept seems to you to be closest to Shakespeare’s own predilection?
8. Is Shakespeare’s vision ultimately nihilistic in this play? If so, what has changed from the beginning of the play to make it so?

Sonnets and Much Ado about Nothing

Sonnets

Analyze the following sonnet. Discuss its theme or themes, language, structure, and sequence of ideas, images, and metaphors. Apply the theme of “transformations” to the poem.

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
 But sad mortality o’ersways their power,
 How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea
 Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
 Oh, how shall summer’s honey breath hold out
 Against the wrackful siege of batt’ring days,
 When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
 Nor gates of steel so strong but Time decays?
 Oh, fearful meditation: where, alack,
 Shall Time’s best jewel from Time’s chest lie hid?
 Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back,
 Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
 Oh, none, unless this miracle have might,
 That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Much Ado about Nothing

Choose one of the following, making sure to give specific instances and specific language, and keeping the theme of “transformations” in mind.

1. It is obvious that the two love stories in *Much Ado about Nothing* contrast in almost every way. In this essay, detail those contrasts. Be very specific as to language, character, and attitude. Take account of all four of the participants. Do transformations occur in both pairs?
2. What is the nexus between the language of war and the language of love? How are the soldiers transformed into lovers? If they aren't, why not?
3. Aside from their contributions to the plot, what does the presence of the Don John crew and the Dogberry crew mean for our understanding of the world of the play? What do they represent, and why should our comic vision in this play need them? How do they transform the comic vision into one of inclusion and exclusion?
4. Is gender defining of one's role in this play? How so? If that is generally the norm, do any of the characters break out of this definition? If so, how, and what does that tell us about Shakespeare's concept?
5. Discuss the way the levels of language are significant in the play: how they are used to indicate character, intellect, and attitude; how they severally contribute to the play's "comic vision"; and how they give evidence of transformation.
6. What is the motif of masks in the play? Where do you see it, and how do you interpret its significance? How does the theme of "transformation" work with the symbolism of masking?
7. What is the position of men and of women in the world of this play? (This will take into account their social and familial status, their sexual independence or its opposite, their "worth," etc.) Does anything change for them as a result of the actions of the play?

Resources

I have a file of materials from some years of teaching this course: they cover numerous topics, from the music of the period to costuming graphics of early productions and other relevant material. Of course, film productions are a primary resource. In addition, we try to attend every Shakespeare play in our area.