SHAKESPEARE

Fall 1991

English 190
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Shakespeare has the reputation of being the greatest dramatist ever, though some would rank one of the Greek tragedians or Moliere with him. In this course, he will not be magnified but will be examined as a working playwright, facing the availabilities afforded by his stages and the actors in his company, the concerns and limits of his audiences, and the need to make a living, while composing through the excitement of a new kind of theatre as a physical venue, as an economic enterprise, and as a mode of expression (more rhetorical, lyric, literary). Hence there will be little room to consider contemporary stagings since the emphasis will be on why Shakespeare as a man of the theatre wrote as he did.

Of course, the plays have meanings that the mechanics of stage interpretations serve. Each of the plays on the course will yield meanings in several senses. But these senses will be revealed as much from the boards of the stage as from the invaluable quiet contemplations of the study.

It is impossible in a term's course attended by students of varied levels of experience with Renaissance thought and even of experience with reading plays to get through even a quarter of Shakespeare's output. To attempt to focus the study so as to develop a higher understanding of his writing the assigned plays for examinations are from his early and middle comedies with one tragedy and one history play. If these can read better, presumably the rest of Shakespeare can also be read better.

The student will be asked to imagine himself an actor on the Elizabethan stage. He will be asked how to direct a scene or a few scenes. He will consider the meanings that emerge out of and, indeed, which originally formed this flow. In short, he will emulate a dramatist making decisions and arranging his forces in order to generate the meanings on an actual stage.

Elizabethan English is like and unlike modern English in vocabulary, meaning, and pronunciations and the differences must be understood. Blank verse is not ordinary speech, and this will need to be considered.

What did Shakespeare write? How do we know that the modern text is actually in his words? How do we know that Shakespeare wrote the words, and not someone else? How do we know which plays he wrote first and which last? Some attentions will need to be paid to these questions.

Lastly, an attempt will be made to see how previous, contemporary, and later plays tell us more about how to read Shakespeare. What is a play? What is theatre? Why does it exist?
Evaluation:

There will be three, scheduled, hour-long tests worth 25% of the course mark each. There will be five unannounced fifteen-minute quizzes worth 5% each. There will be no final examination and no research paper. Performance in class can raise or lower the mark thus generated, in some cases significantly. The median course mark measured by these means has been a "C+.

Textbooks:

You may use any edition of Shakespeare that has notes on the meanings of the words. Do not depend upon an edition that lacks vocabulary notes, preferably running at the bottom of the page. For convenience and economy, some well-edited texts in paper cover are available in the University Bookstore. All of them are edited by David Berington in the Bantam Classics series. These are the plays set for the course:

A Comedy of Errors
The Taming of the Shrew *
A Midsummer Night's Dream *
The Merchant of Venice *
Twelfth Night *
Romeo and Juliet
First Part of Henry IV

* gathered in one volume called Shakespeare: Four Comedies