

Shakespeare – English 391 – 392 - Pease

A Note from the Instructor:

William Shakespeare is the unquestioned master playwright of the English language and one of the three or four most important literary figures in Western culture. To properly appreciate his genius as a dramatist, you should keep in mind these three concepts:

1. Shakespeare is not only the greatest English dramatist, he was among the first English dramatists; therefore, the current techniques of drama have been influenced by the study of his works. Of particular merit is Shakespeare's ability to blend philosophical and psychological implications within plays that exhibit considerable stage action. You should be aware of Shakespeare's technical abilities as you read the plays. These include his ability to take existing stories and convert them into concise, well-structured, dramatic plots; his ability to create interesting, plausible characters and to move them onto, around and off the stage in a logical manner; and his ability to do all this while creating language that, despite its abundance of poetic imagery and rhythm, generally sounds like natural speech. An understanding of Shakespeare's technical abilities will enhance your understanding and appreciation of his works and make you better prepared to evaluate them as you read.
2. Shakespeare wrote his plays to be seen, not read. The thematic, philosophical and psychological interests which exist (and there are many) are merely part of the play. In order to properly understand the full impact of his plays, you should attempt to visualize the necessary stage action as you read the works. It may help if you assume the role of a character or director, always remembering that those who perform in or direct a play must not only know what is being said but also why it is being said, so they can decide how to say it. You should also take advantage of any opportunities to see Shakespearean plays performed, whether on stage, on television or on film so as to better evaluate the infinite variety of interpretations that surround his works.
3. Shakespeare wrote for his own age, not ours. To fault his language as being archaic or his dramatic conventions as being too structured is to suggest that he could and should have written in a syntax and style four hundred years in advance of his own audience. You should then attempt to understand the implications which his plays had for his own age, not just our own. The true student of literature always attempts to grasp two viewpoints at once – relevance of a work to its own age (what made it valuable then) and relevance of the work to the present age (what makes it valuable now). The editors' notes and introductions and, hopefully, my lectures and comments will help you establish the first viewpoint; you will establish the second viewpoint through your own experiences and wisdom.

I hope you enjoy the course and that it will have value to you beyond its academic credit.

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English 391 –392

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COURSE OBJECTIVES AND PROFESSOR'S COMMENTS:

This semester we will study plays that represent two of the four “types” of plays associated with Shakespeare: Comedy, Tragedy, History and Romance. Shakespeare’s audiences were more diverse than is sometimes thought, and the Elizabethan theater appealed to the well-educated and cultured royalty (Elizabeth and James I were great supporters of the theater), to the emerging middle class which was quickly becoming better educated and ambitious to become more cultured, and even to the lower economic classes which, though often illiterate, certainly enjoyed hearing and seeing a good story and could appreciate hearing a language more beautiful than their own. Furthermore, the theaters of Shakespeare’s time were economically available to all sections of society: the “groundlings” could get in for less than a penny (about \$.30 - \$1.00 today). To please this wide range of customers, Shakespeare became adept at creating philosophical characters (like Hamlet) who dealt with matters of personal ethics while confronting ghosts and indulging in sword play and murder, thus satisfying the intellectual interests of the better educated while supplying the excitement and physical action desired by those who enjoy “nothing but dumb show and noise,” to quote Hamlet.

The types of plays also demonstrate the widening intellectual interests of a people involved, with or without their will, into a society undergoing a renaissance of curiosity and knowledge. Shakespeare’s comedies, particularly MSND, display a historical awareness of English drama (the “rude mechanicals”) that indicates a general public interest in what good drama is – and what it is not. The comedies also provided a new and clever venue of entertainment which offered relief from what was a physically and emotionally difficult life for most people.

Shakespeare’s tragedies, such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, and King Lear, reflect the audiences’ interest in the basic human dilemmas of ambition vs. restraint; pride (hubris) vs. humility; trust vs. suspicion; faith vs. doubt. Shakespeare’s tragedies reflect the potential for both happiness and despair and point out that often – at least in Renaissance tragedy – a character’s unhappiness derives from his own personal flaws.

The History plays were particularly appealing to English audiences because the English were just becoming aware that their history was important not only to themselves – as warnings of past errors and encouragement for future glories – but important to the rest of the Western World, as England, for the first time, became a European power to be reckoned with by other countries

And finally, the Romance plays, with their improbable plots and circumstances (people buried at sea come to life on shore; visions bring together father and daughter, husband and wife; a master of “white magic” can control the elements of nature), appealed to the audiences’ sense of wonder and imagination as they found, in the wonderful new medium of the stage, a “brave new world” which reflected, at least in part, the complex, exciting, often dangerous real world in which they found themselves.

Shakespeare, like all other great artists, was influenced by those who went before and by his contemporaries, and he, in turn, influenced his contemporaries and those who came after. The selection of plays this semester will partially demonstrate the breadth of his technical skills – his ability to create masterpieces of different types of plays, without losing the essential elements of technique and style that had made him famous to begin with. In short, we are studying a small selection (about 20%) of the works created by the greatest playwright, perhaps the greatest poet (since most of the plays are also poetry), of the English language. If I do my job right and you do your job right, we will find, at the end of the semester, that 20% isn’t enough and that this is one writer to whom we should return – on our own – after the completion of the course.