**Discussion Questions**

I used versions of the following questions variously: for in-class discussion, oral presentations by students, paper topics, and essay questions on exams. In what follows, I have attempted to erase teaching-related concerns, such as format and length of response, in favor of grouping together the kinds of questions I have found most useful over the years.

Shakespeare’s Treatment of His Sources

Some good examples of Shakespeare’s adapting his plays from earlier materials are as follows:

* In Plautus’s *Menaechmi*, the out-of-town twin eats dinner at the courtesan’s rather than the wife’s; the in-town twin had planned to eat dinner with the courtesan and give her a necklace before he was locked out; and there were no characters corresponding to Luciana or Nell. How do these differences suggest that Shakespeare views marriage in *Comedy of Errors*?
* In Plautus’ *The Brothers Menaechmus*, Menaechmus of Epidamnum (M.E.) has an unnamed wife and a mistress named Erotium; Menaechmus of Syracuse (M.S.) has a clever slave, who has no relatives. In *Comedy of Errors*, Antipholus of Ephesus (A.E.) has a wife named Adriana and an unnamed acquaintance who is a courtesan; Antipholus of Syracuse (A.S.) has a clever slave whose twin is the slave of A.E. What are the effects of changing which characters are named and doubling the slaves?
* In reality, Henry V’s claim to the throne of France was based on a principle, that a man can inherit through his mother, which invalidated Henry’s right to the throne of England; Cambridge’s conspiracy against Henry was motivated by his father Henry IV’s having usurped the throne; and Henry V banished the citizens of Harfleur after capturing the city. Why does Shakespeare suppress or alter these historical facts in *Henry V*?
* Shakespeare would have known at least Geoffrey of Monmouth’s version of the Lear story in *History of the Kings of Britain*; what motivates and/or justifies Shakespeare’s alterations in *King Lear*?
* In Greene’s *Pandosto*, the jealous king believes the oracle immediately, but his wife and son die anyway; sixteen years later, he becomes enamored of his unrecognized daughter and jails her sweetheart; when her identity is revealed, he kills himself. Why does *Winter’s Tale* differ?

Staging Shakespeare Plays as Period Pieces

Depict and/or describe how you would **costume** the main characters of a play, were you an Elizabethan costumer. Be sure your designs match actual references to characters’ clothing in the play, if any.

For the comedies with **music** in them, find Elizabethan music for the songs. Be sure your findings match indications in the play as to how many singers and instruments were available for each song.

Ideally, today’s productions-as-period-pieces would not be **cut**. From any play, choose a scene or a minor character that you think would probably (but wrongly) be cut in production. First, discuss why it is likely to be omitted; then, argue against cutting it, identifying its contribution to the play as a whole.

Staging Shakespeare Plays in Other Settings

Pick a play – this works best with some of the farcical and romantic comedies – and devise a new setting for it. (I have seen good productions of *Much Ado about Nothing* set in Victorian times, when female virginity before marriage had much the same value as in Shakespeare’s day, and of *Twelfth Night* set in the 1970s, with Orsino as a professional musician nicknamed “the Duke” and all the songs taken from the new period.) Discuss what is illuminated by your change in setting and what is lost in adaptation.

Comparison and Contrast

Some possible topics, briefly:

* twins and other confusions of identity in *Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*
* long-delayed reunions of parent couples in *Comedy of Errors* and *Winter’s Tale*
* the treatment of romantic love in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*
* “puritanism” in *Twelfth Night* and *Measure for Measure*
* the roles of Feste in *Twelfth Night* and the Fool in *King Lear*

And fuller descriptions of other such topics:

* Compare and contrast the characters of Bardolph, Nym, and/or Pistol in *Henry V* with their characters in *1 Henry IV* and/or *2 Henry IV.*
* In *Henry V*, the King disguises himself as a common soldier the night before the battle of Agincourt; in *Measure for Measure*, the Duke disguises himself as a friar for most of the play. Compare and contrast the ways this device of the disguised ruler is treated and functions in these plays.
* Compare and contrast the treatment of the dichotomy between appearance and reality in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet.*
* In the closing scene of *Measure for Measure*, only one character knows who’s not dead, and he determines everyone else’s rewards and punishments; in the equally crowded but less public scene of *The Winter’s Tale*, only one character knows who’s not dead, but she does not decide everyone’s fate. Compare and contrast the ways these closing scenes are handled and affect us in these plays.
* Compare and contrast the closing scenes of *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest.* Take into account their central characters (the Duke of Vienna and Prospero, who is rightfully Duke of Milan), their structures, and their themes. Is each one appropriate to the play it concludes?
* Compare and contrast the villainy of Iago in *Othello* with that of Richard III in *Richard III* and/or with that of Edmund in *King Lear*. Discuss whether or not Iago’s villainy is unique in some significant way.
* Compare and contrast the treatment of jealousy in *Othello* with its treatment in *The Winter’s Tale* by deciding whether each of the following is similar or different in the two plays: the provocation for fits of jealousy, the responsibility of the jealous men for their own condition, the actions they take because they are jealous, the consequences of those actions, the means by which the men are cured of being jealous, the nature of their characters before and after their fits of jealousy, and the nature of their wives’ characters and responses to the husbands’ jealousy.

Figurative Language

For any play, locate and explicate at least one simile and at least one metaphor per act.

For any romantic comedy, locate and explicate figurative language describing love (possibly most fruitful when discussing *As You Like It*).

For any history or tragedy, locate and explicate figurative language describing honor (possibly most fruitful when discussing *1 Henry IV*).

Consider clusters of related images, as in these examples from *Romeo and Juliet*: light/dark, day/night, sun/moon/stars, lightning/explosion – especially when one of the lovers is speaking about the other.

For specific plays, locate and discuss recurrent images, whether literal or in figures of speech. The following examples work particularly well (and are sometimes discussed in “Individual Plays”).

Water in *Comedy of Errors*

Gardening or the Sun in *Richard II*

Time and age in *2 Henry IV*

Time in *As You Like It*

Music in *Twelfth Night*

Law or Sex in *Measure for Measure*

Gardens / fruits / animals / black & white / dark & light in *Othello*

Sight / smell / clothing / sex / animals / justice in *King Lear*

Flowers in *The Winter’s Tale*