**MLA Shakespeare Seminar, Summer 2001**

Class met for 2.5 hours twice a week

Assignments are highlighted

**Week 1, Class 1**: Introductions

Student introductions: their names, occupations, reasons for taking course, areas of experience/expertise they bring to the course (plays they have read and/or seen, staged or filmed, lit-crit and/or theatre background), and kinds of questions and/or difficulties with Shakespeare they hope the course will resolve.

My introduction of myself and of Shakespeare’s life, plays, and, to some extent, contexts, including dual emphasis on plays as texts to interpret and as scripts to perform/produce.

**Week 1, Class 2**: *Comedy of Errors*, first of two classes (read entire play before class meets)

Shakespeare’s language

* answers to their comprehension questions
* multiple functions of Adriana’s speech (why it shouldn’t be cut in production)
* opposed effects of that speech and of its dramatic context (combo is funnier)

Shakespeare’s genres: comedy

* general Renaissance understanding of comedy as any happy-ending play
* comedy we would call farce (classical New Greek comedy, classical Roman comedy)
* sentimental comedy, including but not limited to romantic comedy

**Week 2, Class 1**: *Comedy of Errors*, second of two classes (read Plautus & Paul photocopies)

Bring in 2 copies of list of similarities and differences between Shakespeare’s play & Plautus’s, plus effects of differences; turn in one copy of this list upon arriving, and keep one to discuss.

Shakespeare’s use of sources

* differences from *Menaechmi* are keys to cultural and dramatic understanding
* combination with aspect of *Amphitruo* is characteristic of Shakespeare
* choice of setting is often significant, as Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians shows

**Week 2, Class 2**: *Henry IV, Part 1*, first of two classes (read first three acts)

Shakespeare’s structure

* relationships between plot and subplot (parallels/reflections, parodies/inversions)
* play within the play
* effect(s) of juxtaposing scenes (especially ending lines versus beginning lines)
* multiple functions of drawer scene (why it shouldn’t be cut in production)

Shakespeare’s genres: history

* 1598 list labels plays comedy or tragedy, but First Folio adds history-play label
* tragedy of Hotspur + comedy of Prince Hal = history of this part of Henry’s reign

**Week 3, Class 1**: *Henry IV, Part 1*, second of two classes (read last two acts)

Turn in 5-page paper on why not to cut an apparently cut-worthy scene, speech, or minor character from either *Comedy of Errors* or *Henry IV, Part 1*.

Shakespeare’s characters

* Falstaff and Hal are self-contradictory, role-playing, enigmatic constructs
* director and actors need to make some choices readers can avoid making
* seeming realism of Shakespeare’s characters is due to their complexity
* ending lets Hal honor both fathers and mediate between them, not choosing yet

**Week 3, Class 2**: *Twelfth Night*, first of two classes (read first two acts, plus sonnets 1-17)

Shakespeare’s language

* verse as opposed to prose (glance back at previous two plays, too)
* effects of densely poetic language; also, how to describe & discuss poems/poetics
* use of songs, characteristic of mature romantic comedies
* function of continuing imagery, often in this play that of music

Shakespeare’s genres: comedy

* near-disappearance of farce
* presence of emotional pain (grieving, unrequited love, etc.)
* problems of tonality in production (most unfettered joy or deepest melancholy?)

**Week 4, Class 1**: *Twelfth Night*, second of two classes (read last three acts)

Bring in 2 copies of list of ways to direct Malvolio subplot to obtain or to forfeit the sympathy of the audience; justify choice for or against Malvolio by appealing to interpretation of whole play.

Shakespeare’s structure

* juxtaposition of scenes again
* “comic” timing
* relations among plots/subplots

**Week 4, Class 2**: *Hamlet*, first of three classes (read first two acts)

Shakespeare’s genres: tragedy

* Aristotelian definition of tragedy (not the same as classical practice!)
* medieval definition of tragedy (practiced in narrative, not drama)
* Renaissance definition and practice
* modern critical application of Aristotle to *Hamlet* (see next point)

The critical tradition

* *Hamlet’s* former poor reputation among tragedies (“problem play”)
* Freudian interpretation, followed by stage of high repute as psychological tragedy
* reactions against Freudian and other psychological criticism, resulting in current stage of valuing the play for its ambiguities

**Week 5, Class 1**: *Hamlet*, second of three classes (read last three acts, plus photocopied sonnets)

Turn in 5-page paper on one of the sonnets similar to *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare’s characters

* a return to the self-contradictory, role-playing, enigmatic hero
* contrast between Hamlet’s assumed madness and his real melancholy
* opaqueness of motivation an essential quality of Shakespeare’s characterizations
* tendency to allude to an unexplained and undramatized past is another such
* natural human impulse is to rush in where both kinds of space have been left
* soliloquy is the absolutely indispensable technique for characterizing Hamlet

**Week 5, Class 2**: *Hamlet*, third of three classes

Bring in 2 copies of a list of recurrent images in *Hamlet.*

Shakespeare’s themes

* plays ask questions of enduring and universal human interest
* answers probably intended originally may no longer suit audiences today
* plays in general, Shakespeare’s plays in particular, suggest alternative answers

**Week 6, Class 1**: *King Lear*, first of three classes (read first three acts of quarto version)

Shakespeare’s genres: tragedy

* setting the play in pagan times leads to permissibility of committing suicide and creation of purely evil characters (neither of which were in Christian *Hamlet*)
* shift from recent to distant past permits more stylization, less “realism”; one example is already mentioned purity of good and evil in most characters, while folk-tale quality of opening scene and precisely mirror-image sub-plot are others

**Week 6, Class 2**: *King Lear*, second of three classes (read last two acts of quarto version)

Bring in 2 copies of a list of recurrent images in *King Lear*.

Shakespeare’s use of sources

* happy ending of all previous and contemporary versions leads to question as to why Shakespeare’s version kills Cordelia and Lear
* invention of mirror-image sub-plot leads to questions as to its purpose and effect

Shakespeare’s themes

* David Denby’s piece on *Lear*
* individual and bodily mortality the great topic of tragedy (as collective and social continuity that of comedy)

**Week 7, Class 1**: *King Lear*, third of three classes (read folio version)

Bring in list of differences between versions, and their effects.

Shakespeare’s language

* discuss *Hamlet* lists
* discuss *Lear* lists
* compare and contrast effects of recurrent images

Shakespeare’s text

* overall quarto history
* First Folio description
* unique problem of *Lear* text
* composite solution in almost all twentieth-century productions

**Week 7, Class 2**: *The Tempest*, first of two classes (read first two acts)

Turn in 10-page paper on setting any play in a different period in order to retain an originally intended meaning or to convey a contemporary one instead; design work on sets, costumes, or music (where appropriate) may substitute for up to 5 of the 10 pages.

The critical tradition

* identification of Prospero with Shakespeare (based at least in part on inaccurate biography, as this is not Shakespeare’s last play, although he may have thought it would be) formerly led to positive readings of Prospero’s character and actions
* recognition of colonialist connections (clear influence of source) recently led to negative readings of Prospero and to attempts to rehabilitate Caliban
* one of Shakespeare’s most nearly original plays, this becomes almost wholly open to contemporary and conflicting interpretations and performances, plus spin-offs

**Week 8, Class 1**: *The Tempest*, second of two classes (read last three acts)

Shakespeare’s genres: romance

* like and unlike the comedies with which the romances were formerly grouped
* named for relation to source material whose name has now changed meaning

Shakespeare’s themes

* like histories and tragedies (unlike comedies), romances deal with parent/child relations, justice/mercy and sin/forgiveness oppositions, concerns about power

**Week 8, Class 2**: Finish discussing *The Tempest*, if necessary; review the course as a whole; return last papers with course grades on them; end with a party after the usual mid-class break.