

Shakespeare's Historical Imagination

הדמיון ההיסטורי של שייקספיר

Core Course Shakespeare

Prof. Noam Reisner

Course no.: 62629101 2023, Spring term, 4hr credit for BA

Monday and Thursday, 12-14, Webb 102

Reception hours: By appointment, Webb 513

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Course prerequisites: Students must have successfully completed Introduction to British Culture part 1 and Poetry Analysis.

Course Description

The *First Folio* of Shakespeare's collected plays published in 1623 lists 'Histories' as a distinct genre of drama, alongside 'Tragedies and Comedies'. The division of plays under this new generic category implies, however, that Heminges and Condell (former actors in Shakespeare's company who edited the volume) considered as 'Histories' only plays that deal with the English chronicles. A play such as *Julius Caesar*, for example, is listed as a tragedy. Indeed, much of Shakespeare's early career as a playwright saw him experimenting with dramatizing historical narratives gleaned primarily from the Tudor chronicle books of Hall and Holinshed – a genre that soon became Shakespeare's hallmark. Starting in 1590 with a trilogy of plays centred on the Wars of the Roses of the previous century, and the reign of Henry VI, Shakespeare went on to perfect his poetic and dramaturgical art by delving deeper, and farther back into the collective English historical memory of his day. In doing so, he not only teased out the tragic and comic elements of Tudor historical narratives, but explored the very *idea* of 'history' itself, and its manifold political and cultural uses for those locked in a historical gaze within their own present moment. In this course, we will explore Shakespeare's treatment of history in a selection of representative plays while asking: what are the conceptual and theatrical connections between how Shakespeare understands history-making and history-writing with the role of theatre and drama in his own day? What are some of the wider national, political, and ultimately subjective implications of Shakespeare's reimagining of historical epochs to his abiding preoccupation with questions about performance, moral and ethical agency, identity formation, and selfhood? How does Shakespeare navigate in these plays the fine line between censorship, propaganda, and political criticism? And can it be said finally that in wanting to explore the root causes of human motives and action in a wider historical sense, Shakespeare discovered his great poetics of the human subjective 'interior'?

Course Reading

The course will focus on the close reading and discussion of the following plays (read in this sequence): *Richard III*, *Richard II*, *1 and 2 Henry IV (two separate plays)*, *Julius Caesar* and *Henry VIII*. * It is advisable to get hold of copies of the plays in advance of the course (buying online through websites like bookdepository.com is the cheapest and quickest option). The recommended edition is the Shakespeare Arden series. However, cheaper editions (which are less heavily annotated) are also available through Penguin, the Shakespeare Folger Library, or similar publications. In any case, it is compulsory to read the plays before they are discussed in class and always to have a text in class for reference. **Online versions of the Arden Shakespeare are available via the “Drama Online” database accessible via Sorasky Digital Resources. Links for this edition will be provided on Moodle.**

Course Requirements

Attendance: attendance is compulsory. Students who accumulate more than 3 unjustified absences will lose 5% of the final grade per absence. Students who miss more than 30% of the classes, regardless of circumstances, will not be able to complete the course.

Midterm exam (30% of grade): there will be a single midterm exam, mo’ed alef and bet (see schedule below), which will cover all of the material of the course up to that point. IMPORTANT: it is not possible to complete the course with a failed or incomplete midterm grade.

Take-home final exam (70% of grade): there will be a final take-home exam, posted through the moodle website on the designated date (mo’ed alef 13.7.23, mo’ed bet 18.8.23).

***Note that contrary to what was stated on earlier drafts of the syllabus when this was initially mandated, in line with new guidelines to lecturers, NO recordings will be made available of this class.**

Detailed Schedule

13.3 – Introduction: The *First Folio* and the question of genre

16.3 – Introduction: Renaissance theories of history

20.3 – Introduction: *The Mirror for Magistrates* and the *De Cassibus* tradition

23.3 – Introduction: “this wooden O” – adapting history to the stage

30.3 – *Richard III*: history as morality

PESSACH BREAK

17.4* – *Richard III* (continued) * short class due to Holocaust memorial day ceremony

20.4 – *Richard III* (continued)

24.4* – *Richard III* (continued)* short class due to Yom Hazikaron ceremony

27.4 – *Richard II*: history as tragic theatre

1.5 – *Richard II* (continued)

4.5 – *Richard II* (continued)

8.5 – *1 Henry IV*: history as cultural nostalgia

11.5 – *1 Henry IV* (continued)

12.5 – **Midterm mo'ed A**

15.5 – *1 Henry IV* (continued)

18.5 – *2 Henry IV*: history and the birth of the Tudor nation

22.5 – *2 Henry IV* (continued)

29.5 – *2 Henry IV* (continued)

1.6 – * **No class. Yom HaStudent**

5.6 – Shakespeare and the historical idea of Rome

8.6 – *Julius Caesar*: history as political allegory

12.6 – *Julius Caesar* (continued)

15.6 – *Julius Caesar* (continued)

16.6 – **Midterm mo'ed B**

19.6 – *Henry VIII*: history the politics of ambiguity

22.6 – *Henry VIII* (continued)

26.6 – *Henry VIII* (continued)

29.6 - Revision and conclusions: history and the world's theatre

Bibliography

When writing the final take-home exam, students may find useful the essays contained in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge, 2006). If so, please remember to follow proper citation rules. Other materials will be provided on Moodle.