

## *Shakespeare Comedies*

ENL 4321  
Fall 2006  
Shakespeare: Comedies  
TR 9:30-10:45 T 6:25-9:05

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Hours: 11:00-12:00 TR and T 5-6  
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**Required Texts:** *The Taming of the Shrew: Texts and Contexts*, Dolan ed., Bedford  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream: Texts and Contexts*, Paster and Howard eds.,  
Bedford  
*Much Ado about Nothing*, Berry and Camp eds., Cambridge UP  
*Much Ado about Nothing*, Branagh, Norton

### **Objectives and Learning Outcomes**

The primary **objective** of this course is to acquaint students with three Shakespearian comedies. As a result, it aims for depth. A secondary **objective** is to provide students an appreciation of why Shakespeare remains a popular literary figure. To that purpose the course employs the use of text and film. Doing so provides a visual context for approaching Shakespeare studies. A third **objective** lies in instilling students with the understanding of drama as something meant not only for the stage but for film as well as a literary artifact that helps define an historical period.

The course explores the plays and investigates interrelationships in them: interrelationships between power and authority, both royal and plebeian, and the threats thereto, be they from apprentices, general commoners, the proto-middle class, or masterless men. They also illustrate the political, social, and institutional scenes that surround them. Through them we see the material as well as psychological forces and pressures at work on both the playwrights and their works.

**Learning outcomes** follow from **objectives**. By becoming familiar with both text and film students emerge from the class with a greater appreciation of the material. Material learned here translates into the **learning outcome** of creating life-long learners who enrich their lives through the reading, comprehension, and interpretation of the literary arts.

### **And now for something completely different (sort of) . . .**

This term we will explore three comedies and several film versions of these plays. Each film will differ significantly from what we know of Shakespearian productions. Settings, costumes, editing, and time all alter the primary text. Some will strike us as laughable because of being caught in time, but when we contextualize the production, we refocus our lenses, so to speak. Peter Hall's *Dream* is very Sixties, for example, while Michael Hoffman's—set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—is very nineteen-nineties.

As you read and re-read the plays along with viewing the films, be especially alert to these considerations: (1) Shakespeare wrote plays—not sermons, editorials, or textbooks. Therefore, looking for the meaning of a play in one particular passage is futile. Also dangerous to assume is that any character's viewpoint represents Shakespeare's. Another factor that one must recognize about plays is that words function as only part of any play; silences and numerous non-verbal dramatic devices contribute crucially to our perceptions and understanding; something directors often exploit. (2) Shakespeare wrote plays in accordance the dramatic and theatrical conventions

of his time. What may appear absurd or unrealistic often becomes clear with reference to those conventions. Directors try to eliminate the obscurity. (3) Shakespeare's language is highly charged. The challenge comes not so much from encountering and trying to grasp archaic words and constructions (many of which come clear through repetition) but from being able to respond to language that has more resonance than we are accustomed to in our daily lives. Granted, Shakespeare's language grows more remote to us with each passing year, but through reading the plays (not *Cliff's Notes*), re-reading, and viewing the films, we develop a familiarity with that language.

Keep in mind as well the number of Shakespeare films that have appeared in recent years: Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Hamlet*, *Love's Labor's Lost*; Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* with Mel Gibson (not to mention the older *Romeo and Juliet* and the Burton-Taylor *Shrew*); Lawrence Fishburn's *Othello*; Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard*; Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*; Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet*; Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Callista Flockhart; and *Hamlet* with Ethan Hawk; Julie Taymor's stunningly brilliant *Titus* with Anthony Hopkins (sort of a *Mad Max*-meets-Shakespeare-as-directed-by-Federico Fellini), Billy Morrissette's *Scotland, PA* (a darkly comic take on *Macbeth*), *Ten Things I Hate about You*, and the witty and delightful *Shakespeare in Love*—the mind boggles. While Shakespeare may be dead (and he was *Newsweek's* "Dead White Male of the Year" for 1997), his works remain alive and well and if not playing at a multiplex near you at least on your video store's shelf.

## Requirements

**Written work:** Students will submit two analytical/explication papers, I will give suggestions for the papers. Paper grades constitute 35% of the final grade.

In addition, students will submit at the beginning of class two-page typed **response papers** (RP) on the specific days designated. Response papers are informal exploratory *analytical* responses to the material assigned not how you feel about it, nor whether you think it is good or bad, nor whether you like it or not, nor how it relates to your personal life, nor how it parallels a contemporary situation. Your first response will be to your initial reading of *The Taming of the Shrew*—what it says of people and issues of authority, what it may be saying about contemporary social relations in (i.e. Renaissance) England, its imagery, patterns that you find, questions that it raises for you, confusions it causes you. Response papers allow students to engage in the writing process prior to facing the longer papers.

Response papers *cannot be made up* (i.e., turned in late) in the event of your absence; however, I will not count the four lowest grades which means that should you be absent and receive a "0" for up to four assignments, you will not be penalized for having missed those classes. Hence, you must submit a minimum of ten responses to receive full credit for this part of the course. I will score the papers on the quality of the response with a ✓ for a basic response, a ✓+ for a more in-depth response, and a + for a superior response, a rough equivalent of a "C," "B," and "A." Response papers account for 20% of the grade.

**Tests:** Students will have three tests, one on each play. Tests will consist of identifications on background materials, technical terms, characters, places, and/or quotations; short essay questions on specific issues in the plays/films; and/or a longer essay combining discussion of several

plays/films and the ideas and issues therein. You will need large format blue books and pen to

take the tests. Test grades make up 35% of the final grade.

**Attendance and participation:** Be forewarned that a majority of the material for tests come from lectures and class discussion. Poor attendance will result in poor performance on the tests as will failure to take notes. More than four absences will reduce the final grade by a half letter grade.

I base my approach to Shakespeare study on the critical, social, and historical contexts surrounding the plays as a means to deciphering them. Film presents another challenge as we see directors impose their visions on Shakespeare's work. I lecture a good bit of the time yet expect students to participate meaningfully in the exploration of the plays and films. To do so requires that you bring your book to class daily.

I take student participation into account as part of the final grade. Failure to participate in discussion will lower the final grade by a half letter grade. Attendance and participation constitute 10 % of the grade.

**Realities:** This course is a 4000-level (i.e., senior-level) English course and fulfills the Shakespeare requirement for those completing the major prior to Fall 2006. As such it aims at and directs itself primarily to the English major, which in no way means or implies that the non-major will not perform well. Generally, non-majors outnumber English majors in any given class. Given that this is a 4000-level course, I expect students to have competence in composition, grammar, and mechanics, and to know proper quotation formatting and citation methods for the quotation of verse and prose passages from dramatic works of this period along with MLA style. Writing guidelines are available on my website [fiu.edu/~free](http://fiu.edu/~free) to aid both majors and non-majors. Students may also meet with me individually for guidance, but I will not read entire drafts of papers.

Sometimes students who have not written an analytical paper since their freshman English sequence or have not had an upper division English course--and that includes English majors--do not perform as well as they might on their first paper. When that occurs, rather than penalizing the student with a low grade, I indicate an "NG" for "no grade" on the paper. Students must then rewrite that paper after consultation with me to receive a grade.

The University considers plagiarism a serious academic offense. Plagiarism will result in an "F" in the course as well as the filing of an academic misconduct report that will go to Academic Affairs where the report will go into the student's permanent file. Plagiarism can result in a student's dismissal from the University. Dismissal means that the student may never be readmitted to the University.

I reserve right to make changes in this syllabus to meet course demands and student needs.

Two useful websites: [bardcentral.com](http://bardcentral.com), [shakespearehigh.com](http://shakespearehigh.com)