Perspectives

In an address delivered in 1976 Alistair Cooke called Shakespeare “the king of the foxes.” The label derives from an ancient saying: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing”—a saying Sir Isaiah Berlin elaborated on to distinguish between those “who relate everything to a single central vision” (hedgehogs like Plato, Dante, Dostoevsky) and those “who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory . . . seizing upon a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into a . . . unitary vision” (foxes like Aristotle, Shakespeare, Pushkin).

As one way of defining a major element of Shakespeare’s genius, “the king of the foxes” proves an apt phrase. It also serves as a warning for those who expect clear messages expressed systematically in the plays, for “the king of foxes” fills his plays with “leaping life,” in Joan Rees’s words, and exploits the English language in an extraordinary way. Thus no one formula exists on how to read a Shakespeare play; no one critical method will mine all the riches. How then does one approach these works? In the initial reading (note that “initial” implies reading the works more than once), strive to achieve a sense of the play as a whole: its main lines of action and the interrelationships of its characters. Are you clear as to what happens and why it happens as it does. Subsequent readings will allow you to refine your understanding of interrelationships among the characters, discern subtleties in structure, identify image patterns, note stylistic variations along with other elements.

As you read and re-read the plays, 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 is assuming that any character’s viewpoint represents Shakespeare’s. Another factor that one must recognize about plays is that words are only part of any play; silences and numerous non-verbal dramatic devices contribute crucially to our perceptions and understanding. (2) Shakespeare wrote plays in accordance with the dramatic and theatrical conventions of his time. What may appear absurd or unrealistic often becomes clear with reference to those conventions. Regardless of whether you have an Elizabethan or modern stage in mind, try to visualize each scene on stage as you read. These works are not novels; they beg for living, breathing actors to infuse them with life. (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 envisioning the action, 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 Romeo+Juliet; A Midsummer Night’s Dream with Callista Flockhart; and Hamlet (again!) with Ethan Hawk; Julie Taymor’s stunningly brilliant Titus with Anthony Hopkins (sort of a Mad Max-meets-Shakespeare-as-directed-by-Federico Fellini), and do not forget 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 are alive and well and if not playing at a multiplex near you at least on your video store’s shelf.

**Comedies under study this term**

*The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Much Ado about Nothing, Twelfth Night*

Comedies oftentimes perplex students brought up on Saturday morning cartoons and proceeding to the average television sitcom, SNL skits, and films like American Pie and There’s Something About Mary. Renaissance comedy focuses less on the slapstick pie-in-the-face and more on the idea of the proverbial happy ending, especially in the reformation and renewal of the social fabric.

All plays must be read in their entirety in their early modern English prior to the first day they are under discussion. Relying solely on prose synopses will diminish your appreciation of Shakespeare’s works and severely weaken your ability to do well on tests. You must bring the playtext with you to class for each day a play is under discussion.

**Requirements**

*Written work:* Students will submit two short six-eight page analytical/explication papers, one prior to midterm and a second due toward the end of the term. Please note that the “five-
paragraph essay” with its tripartite A, B, C thesis that you wrote in freshman English classes does not constitute academic discourse at the senior level and is wholly unacceptable (see Realities below). Because of the course structure, the first paper will be on Shrew. Paper grades constitute 30% of the final grade.

In addition, for each play or group of material under study students will submit at the beginning of class two-page typed response papers on the specific days designated below. “Response papers” are exactly that—your initial and exploratory analytical response to the material under discussion for the day, not how you “feel” about it, whether you think it is “good” or “bad,” how it relates to your personal life, or how it parallels a contemporary situation. For example, on 9 September you will be responding to your initial encounter with Shrew—what it says of people and issues of authority, what it may be saying about contemporary England, its imagery, patterns that you find, questions that it raises for you, confusions it causes you; on 11 September you will be responding to primary material in the back of the Dolan edition. With the remaining plays response papers are due on the first and last days of discussion. Response papers allow students to engage in the writing process prior to facing the longer papers. They cannot be made up (i.e., turned in late) in the event of your absence; however, I will not count the two lowest grades which means that should you be absent and receive a “0” for up to two assignments, you will not be penalized for having missed class. 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 will account for 20% of the grade.

Tests: Students will have four tests, one on each play. The last test will take place during the final examination period. Tests will contain a variety of identifications/quotations, short answer essays, and a longer, more fully developed essay. Tests make up 30% of the final grade.

Quizzes: Brief quizzes may occur randomly to ensure that students are keeping up with the readings. They will take place at the very beginning of class and cannot be made up. If your are ten to fifteen minutes late, you will miss the quiz and cannot make it up.

Additional short work on Shakespeare’s language and style may make up part of the course as well.

Quizzes and any additional short work will account for 10% of the final grade.

N.B. Should no quizzes or additional work occur, the 10 % will divide equally making paper grades 35% of the grade, test scores 35% of the grade.

Attendance and participation: Once I have put names with faces, I rarely take roll formally; however, I do note your absences and enter them into my gradebook daily and take attendance into account as part of the final grade. 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 failing to take notes.
Since I base my approach to Shakespeare study on the critical, social, and historical contexts surrounding the plays as a means to deciphering them, I lecture a good bit of the time yet recognize that class discussion and queries remain an integral part of the learning experience. The Dolan edition provides good materials to aid students in participating in the critical/historical dialogue. I, therefore, expect students to participate meaningfully in the exploration of the plays and will take student participation into account as part of the final grade.

Attendance and participation constitute 10 % of the grade.

Realities

This course is a 4000-level (i.e., senior-level) course and fulfills the Shakespeare requirement for the English major. 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. Although it contains some introductory material, the course examines issues and ideas within the plays from a socio-historical context and studies the works primarily as literature.

Because this is a 4000-level course, I expect students in it 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 to aid both majors and non-majors are available on my web page, and I will briefly discuss writing analytical literary essays. I do not assign students topics for papers. However, I do make suggestions about potential topics during discussions of the works under study. 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 students with a low grade, I indicate an “NG” for “no grade” on the paper. Students must rewrite that paper for a grade after consultation with me.

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 a permanent file. Plagiarism can result in a student’s dismissal from the University. Dismissal means that the student can never be readmitted to the University.

I reserve the right to make changes in this syllabus to meet the demands of the course.
28 August  Classes begin
2 September  Labor Day–no class
4 September  Introduction and Background
9-25 September  *The Taming of the Shrew*, 1st Response Paper (RP) 9 Sept.*
30 September  TEST
2-14 October  *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 6th RP 2 October, first paper 7 Oct.
16 October  TEST
21-30 October  *Much Ado about Nothing*, 7th RP 21 October

**Last Day for DR/WI by 7:00pm**

4 November  TEST
6 November-2 December  *Twelfth Night*, 8th RP 6 November, second paper 2 December
11 November  Veteran’s Day–no class

*Response paper due dates for additional primary readings in Dolan:

2nd RP 11 September, pp. 172-184, 197-199, 309-312
3rd RP 18 September, pp. 204-206, 225-228, 235-243
4th RP 23 September, pp. 257-288
5th RP 25 September, pp. 146-159