

**Carleton University
Fall 2013
Department of English**

**ENGL 4301A
A Seminar: Shakespeare's Problem Comedies
Wednesdays, 2:30-5:30**

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Office hours: Tues. 2:30-3:30**

This is a seminar in Shakespeare's "problem" comedies, a designation assigned to a group of plays which, despite their happy endings, leave readers with deeper moral concerns or uncertain feelings. Just why these plays are considered problematic and troubled will be at the centre of our collaborative inquiry, although seminar topics may range widely from matters of style and sources to performance history and conventions. The course will be concerned with genre and with the critical traditions surrounding these plays, and inevitably we will find ourselves talking about the conflicts within families and between the genders, as well as broader social issues which we should take care to approach in informed and methodological ways.

Objectives of the Course:

- *Leading the way is a close familiarity with a select group of Shakespearean plays.
- *A greater appreciation of literary works in context, and particularly in relation to the received ideas of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries concerning human nature and its tribulations.
- *The nature of literary genres and the challenges of defining literary ethos.
- *An extended employment of critical terms.
- *Experience in presenting literary ideas and defending them in a dialogic environment.
- *Strategizing literary essays around significant literary questions, and honing skills leading to efficient communication, fully idiomatic critical writing, and an accurate use of scholarly research and documentation.

Requirements of the Course:

Given the seminar format, your presence and participation are essential. As a matter of course, you should come with a reading knowledge of each play and be prepared to participate in the discussions. You will be called upon to perform twice during the term as a seminar presenter. Your presentation should have a clear thesis, and a specific critical methodology that is part of your argument. The topic should have a problem-solving dimension, as opposed to historical reporting or textbook factualizing. Delivery time should not exceed 20 minutes in order to allow for discussion. Above all,

edify and challenge your audience. These seminar presentations will count for 40% of the final grade (20% each), and you should keep clear notes and outlines in case I need them for further evaluation. The best time to discuss them with me is just after the presentation while they remain fresh in my mind!

In addition to these seminars, the course requirements include two final papers of from 6-8 pages each, on different plays than those in the seminars. They are due on Tuesday, Dec. 10, in the English Secretariat, 1812 Dunton Tower. These will count for 25% each. They should be clearly designed, make challenging and innovative points, and be well-documented according to a recognized style sheet (I am not fussy in these matters so long as you are consistent). The lengths are intentionally short as an inducement for you to write in a cogent and compact style and to permit you to concentrate on a carefully crafted, idiomatic, and accurately documented statement. (Your writing should now be well beyond problems of usage, grammar, and scholarly conventions.)

The remaining 10% is for attendance and general participation. Again, I am very keen that each meeting is a plenary one and that discussion follows from a full knowledge of the texts and a careful audition of the seminar presentations.

The texts are: Della Porta, *The Sister* and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, and *The Winter's Tale*. I have ordered in a few Signet copies of these plays, but in theory, any edition should do, so long as it is coded by act, scene and line number (I can't imagine any editions that aren't!). The (Giambattista) Della Porta book can be ordered on line from a remainder supplier like Powell's Books in Chicago, or through ABE books, or Amazon, currently at \$2.50, + 3.99 shipping.

The Reading Schedule

- Sept. 11, Brief introductory meeting; sign up for seminars.
- Sept. 18, *Troilus and Cressida*
- Sept. 25, *Troilus and Cressida*
- Oct. 2, *Measure for Measure*
- Oct. 9, *Measure for Measure*
- Oct. 16, *Merchant of Venice*
- Oct. 23, *Merchant of Venice*
- Oct. 30, *All's Well*
- Nov. 6, *All's Well*
- Nov. 13, *The Winter's Tale*
- Nov. 20, *The Winter's Tale*
- Nov. 27, *The Sister*
- Dec. 4, *The Sister* (Term papers accepted on this date; or up to 4:30, Dec. 10 in the Secretariat, DT 1812).

Plagiarism

I am obliged to warn you not to engage in unethical scholarly activity, which, in the case of seminar presentations and term papers, can only involve passing off the work of others as your own. Make it a point of pride and personal integrity to acknowledge

what you have taken from the great debate over Shakespeare and document it appropriately. This is the bedrock of true scholarship and hardly worth fudging. In any case, the cunning dimensions of memory whereby cheaters are detected can sometimes be amazing!

Early Feedback

Sign up for a seminar presentation early in the term. These are evaluated as they are given and I can discuss them with you as early as after class.

Deadlines

I've given up negotiating these in fairness to everyone. Bona fide documentation, of course, is something else and will win for you all the accommodations allowed by the university.

Research

I'm still a bit old-fashioned about web research in that much that I have seen on line is itself cribbed and condensed from the work of others, or else is circulated without vetting and editorial control. Good things may be found there, to be sure, but it is often difficult to discern from the mediocre unless you are a seasoned reader. Vetted journals on line are, of course, something else (JSTOR etc.)—to be documented in the same way as paper copies.

The Paul Menton Center for learning disabilities, The Writing Tutorial Services for coaching in the writing of essays, The Student Life Services, The Student Academic Success Centre, Accommodation for Religious Observances and for Pregnancy.

These programs are listed here as a reminder of the many services provided to Carleton students, and of the widely disseminated information concerning their locations and provisions. You should not hesitate to avail yourself of these organizations according to your needs.

A few thoughts about good seminar presentations:

1. Present engaging ideas. Work close to the text. Dialogue with a few authors of published criticism. Be a little polemical if you like, and stand up rhetorically for challenging ideas. Don't get too caught up in "he said, she said" arguments and the kind of analysis that originates essentially as gossip. Make a mental note of how often class discussions head in this direction! If Shakespeare plays are about character, how should we talk about them?
2. Define topics cogently and methodically. Build arguments sequentially, Advance a clear thesis. Keep a clearly argued conclusion in mind.
3. Work from a written text or a clear set of speaking notes. I will not be looking at these, but do keep a presentable copy of your working bibliography for open consultation.
4. Remember your audience, what we can absorb, based on how quickly (or slowly) we can deal with new ideas, what we know, and what the human ear can hear. Enthuse us with your ideas. Look us in the eye. Make certain we're following you.
5. Save a few questions or additional comments for the question and answer period. Be prepared to give your main ideas in resume, state what basic issues are at stake, why your

comments matter to the play and what problems they solve, and what kinds of critical methodologies you employed to build your argument. I will be asking these questions not only to the presenters but to others in the class about the papers given.

6. Think in eclectic and versatile terms. It is well to refer to critical schools and ideas, but too soon to have a pat critical answer for everything based on a single critical perspective. These tend to be ready-made, in any case, and tend to interfere with the foundation of a personal critical stance. These positions are likewise often political and tend to hi-jack works of art to fit their own agendas. But do think about historical contexts, received ideas, the challenges of plot design, ambiguities, equivocations, and indeterminacies. Think audiences then and now. Think conventions, reception theory, genre and the problems of definition, comic justice in relation to social justice, strategies of dialogue and strategies of closure.

A few thoughts about good term papers. I prefer well-researched term papers, those that have been built in dialogue with other scholarly voices. This is not to say that the paper should be a work-a-day gathering of opinions neatly linked; that formula, though much taught, is deadly. The topic and the direction should be your own, debating your own informed views in dialogic fashion with others. Above all, for a paper to succeed, it needs a clear statement of purpose, a sense of methodology, and a well-posted progression towards a cogently argued conclusion. This is predicated on the notion that literature makes complex demands upon its readers, raising problems that invite scrutiny, and that such scrutiny will lead to primary questions about the nature of literature, itself, and the multitudinous ways in which it generates experience from moral instruction to sheer aesthetic delight. It is useful to remember, too, that things that might be taken for granted, such as what a “character” is, rarely should be. Characters are literary constructs composed of tendentious choices consolidated in words—as most features of literature by definition must be. In a larger sense, writing about literature is about reading accurately, reflecting critically, and writing cogently—operations not unlike those called for by all enquiries into the nature of things social or creative across the gamut of university disciplines. Keep back-up copies of your work in the event a paper gets lost, and always hand in paper copies; never submit them to me as an e-mail attachment.