



## **Intro to Shakespeare – Syllabus**

**Course Description:** The rockstar of his day, he wrote sitcoms, tragedies, teen romances, and history serials. He invented words, challenged conventions, and turned the entertainment world upside down—that’s right, we’re talking about William Shakespeare. Throughout this course, you’ll be introduced to Shakespeare’s stage and language, receive an overview of early modern England, and interact with three plays. Assignments will include formal literary analysis papers as well as pieces intentionally crafted to improve comprehension. *No prior experience with Shakespeare is necessary.*

### **Course Outline:**

**Week One:** Who Was Shakespeare? (Overview, Context, Student Experience)

**Week Two:** How Do We Experience Shakespeare? (Speeches from *Julius Caesar*, Assorted Scenes, Etiquette for Attending a Shakespeare Play)

**Week Three:** Experiencing Comedies (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)

**Week Four:** Writing about Characters (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)

**Week Five:** Experiencing Tragedies (*Macbeth*)

**Week Six:** Writing about Plays (*Macbeth*)

**Week Seven:** Recovery after the Scottish Play (Selections from *The Tempest*)

**Week Eight:** Finals (Student-Selected from a Limited List—with Summaries!)

**Grading Information:** All assignments will be graded using *The Advanced Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.

## **Required Texts:**

The student should have access to copies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and whatever fourth play the student selects.

There is no required edition; the student must simply cite the edition used, as different editions are based on different versions of Shakespeare's plays. However, **please do not use "modern English" translations or abridged copies of the plays, but instead choose edited copies in Elizabethan English** (e.g. the Norton Shakespeare)—we'll be working through how to understand Shakespeare's language.

**If you would like an online copy**, The Folger Shakespeare Library provides (as of July 2020) free digital editions with line numbers.

We recommend that students interact with the text (highlighting and marginal notes), but students are *not* required to own copies of the work—texts from the library are perfectly all right! If you would like to own, inexpensive copies can be found online and at used bookstores.

As students tend to experience stronger reading comprehension when not reading on a screen, we would highly recommend that students have access to a hard copy of the works (a printed out PDF works well, too!).

## **OPTIONS FOR THE FINAL STUDENT-SELECTED PLAY:**

Below, we have compiled a list of the plays you can select for your final project, as well as a short summary of what you can expect from each play and its genre (comedy, tragedy, history).

Fellow Shakespeare nerds might notice that several plays are missing from the list. Why, you ask? As we've covered before, not all of Shakespeare's subject matter is fun for the whole family—some content is for major British history geeks, some is explicit, and some is just less comfortable for many people. Therefore, we are keeping this to a "pre-college" list of plays, so you can have fun exploring Shakespeare's canon without getting too deep into intense content.

## OUR TOP RECOMMENDATIONS:

*Uncertain about which to select? These plays are some of our favorites.*

**AS YOU LIKE IT. *Comedy.*** “All the world’s a stage” (2.7.138) as two cousins embrace exile from their courtly home to join a band of nobility living in the Forest of Arden. One of the most iconic moments is when heroine Rosalind, dressed as a man for safety, meets with her love interest Orlando to “cure” Orlando of his love . . . for Rosalind.

**HAMLET. *Tragedy.*** Yes, it’s the one with the skull. This deeply-introspective play follows a young prince who is spurred to revenge when the ghost of his father claims that he was murdered by his brother, Hamlet’s uncle... who also married Hamlet’s mom. Awkward. The play is chock full of vengeance, madness, and bloodshed, as well as some of the most iconic speeches you’ve ever heard—although there is an awful lot of talking.

**KING LEAR. *Tragedy.*** If you like psychology and beautiful poetry, this is a good choice for you. *King Lear* looks on as the titular character slips into madness, his world slowly falling apart.

**MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING. *Comedy.*** This is a favorite of many high school students. It’s a bantering love story between a jaded war hero and a sassily strong lady, both of whom claim they can’t stand romantic love. Through twists, turns, and betrayals, the pair are tricked into falling for each other.

**THE COMEDY OF ERRORS. *Comedy.*** A short, slapstick play, *Comedy of Errors* watches the zaniness that ensues when two long-lost sets of twins are suddenly brought back together.

**TWELFTH NIGHT. *Comedy.*** This another twin comedy, this time with a more involved plot. After twins Sebastian and Viola were torn apart in a shipwreck, Viola must provide for herself by pretending to be a man—but ends up falling in love with the duke, her employer. As if that weren’t awkward enough, the duke’s crush Olivia (who is completely disinterested) falls for “Cesario,” Viola’s male alter ego. (Good thing Viola has a male twin, right? Basically the same thing.) There’s also a lovely cast of ridiculous side characters.

## OTHER PLAYS:

*Equally good plays, but harder to read or more cliché in the case of Romeo & Juliet.*

**LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST. *Comedy.*** This play is a close second with *Twelfth Night*. However, it's very complicated and comes together best live. It follows a king and his best buddies as they agree to give up romance in exchange for study . . . right before the beautiful Princess of France and her ladies arrive.

**HENRY V. *History.*** Containing some of Shakespeare's most iconic speeches, this play follows the titular Henry as he leads his troops to an unlikely conquest of France.

**OTHELLO. *Tragedy.*** Iago, one of Shakespeare's most despicable villains, cunningly turns the Moorish general Othello against his wife Desdemona. There's a lot to be said about race in this play.

**ROMEO & JULIET. *Tragedy.*** Spoiler alert: R&J is not a beautiful love story. It's a story of two teenagers who get infatuated with each other, make poor decisions, and cause a lot of bloodshed. Eek. At least there's positive societal change in the end. (*That*, of course, is my biased opinion—many readers and scholars love *R&J*! I am, unfortunately, not one of them. :)) On the plus side, there are a lot of iconic speeches and lines in the play . . . and some people do think it's romantic.

**THE WINTER'S TALE. *Tragedy.*** Known as one of Shakespeare's "problem plays" (plays with complex tone shifts—somewhat like a tragicomedy), *The Winter's Tale* begins as a dark psychological drama about a royal family and transitions into a pastoral, joyful comedy with a *lot* of shepherds.

***Plays that you may select if you are a massive British history geek and don't mind a more dry piece:*** *We particularly love King Henry IV parts 1 and 2, but you can also read King John, Richard II, Henry VI, Parts 1-3, Richard III.*



## **Intro to Shakespeare**

### **Lesson One: Who Was Shakespeare?**

#### ***Overview, Context, and Student Experience***

#### **SAMPLE LESSON**

If you are anything like me in high school, this course may seem a little daunting. Maybe the name “Shakespeare” makes you shake in your boots—maybe you have never taken a literature course before—maybe you love Shakespeare, but just don’t know what to expect.

Wherever you are right now, I get it, and I’ve been there! So, before we get started, I’d love to set our stage. Instead of picturing our eight weeks together like a serious and stiff literature class about the Bard—let’s imagine that we are about to spend two months getting coffee (or tea, hot chocolate, water, whatever you prefer!) in your favorite cozy setting.

For a little while each week, we are going to talk about a man who made a profound impact on pop culture, history, and literature. We are both planning to learn—I always learn when I teach—and we are going to have fun with it. We will watch clips, make mistakes, make improvements, and maybe bake themed cookies.

Does that sound good? Excellent . . . let’s get started.

*Note: Throughout the class, we will provide footnotes with citations for additional resources if a particular topic interests you.*

#### **WHY DO WE READ SHAKESPEARE? –**

If you wanted to describe a lonely yet swaggering critic drinking skim-milk, you couldn’t without Shakespeare—according to the Oxford English Dictionary, he’s our source for those words (sans “drinking” and “yet,” of course).

But why do we read him in the twenty-first century, you ask? Excellent question. Here are several of our key reasons, which have been developed over years of study:

**GROWING INTELLECTUALLY.** Shakespeare’s writing challenges us. We encounter unfamiliar words, complex plots, crazy side-plots, sympathetic villains, flawed heroes—I could go on. If you want a stronger mind, a wider breadth of knowledge, and a deeper understanding of human society, this is the place for you.

**UNDERSTANDING LANDMARKS.** Why do we go see the Statue of Liberty, Eiffel Tower, or Grand Canyon? Because they’re beautiful, culturally-important, and provide a stronger grasp on history. Shakespeare is a landmark in the English language.

**ENJOYING LITERATURE & THEATRE.** We wish we could tell you that, when we pick up Shakespeare, it’s always for some deep, dramatic (no pun intended) reason. Honestly, it’s because we love to read Shakespeare to see how it makes literature come alive. These plays are hilarious, shocking, human, messy, touching, and appalling.

## **SHAKESPEARE’S ENGLAND –**

Now, let’s turn back the clock to the mid-1560s.

This was after the reign of the infamous Henry VIII (you may remember his six wives) and, fortunately, England was in something of a golden era. Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne, bringing more monarchic stability than her nation had seen for a while.

England had just lost blood, sweat, and tears over religion—first, Henry VIII invented the Church of England (maybe, possibly to divorce his first wife, which was against Catholic doctrine). Then, upon taking the throne, Catholic Queen Mary I persecuted Protestants, burning hundreds at the stake. With Elizabeth’s ascension, the Church of England was back in full force, and neighboring Catholic nations (such as Spain) were not thrilled. This was all happening during the English Renaissance, which reached England in the mid-16th century. The movement began in Italy in the late 14th century, growing from a rebirth—hence the name—of interest in Greek and Roman cultures, matched with a flourishing of art, eloquence, and humanism (a complex philosophy, but to simplify, an emphasis on studying the humanities over theological texts). During this period, Christopher Columbus “discovered” the “New World,” kicking off a colonial venture from Europe, and Martin Luther clashed with the Roman Catholic Church. Luther’s translation of the Bible is thought to have spurred increased literacy rates, too.

Just as the English Renaissance was taking hold, on 26 April 1564, William Shakespeare was baptized. Unfortunately, we don't know *exactly* when he was born, but we do know that his father was a tradesman and his mother was a minor heiress. (In the early modern period, class distinctions were still pretty rigid—you were born into a particular social class—so congratulations to John Shakespeare.) Shakespeare would live to be 52, during which time he wrote dozens of plays and over a hundred sonnets, as well as acting and sharing in the ownership of a theatre.

In the Elizabethan era, wrestling was a popular sport, and proper gentlemen knew how to play instruments like the lute. Yes, ruffled collars were the rage, but there were some fashion-forward ideas—for example, ladies' dresses were pinned together out of a variety of parts (bodice, sleeves, underskirts, etc) so that you could mix and match for more variety. As for everyday life struggles, not all homes had ovens of their own, so it wasn't surprising to send your finished pies to the baker's.

London, where Shakespeare's theatrical life largely existed, was the capitol. It housed the queen and the major courts of law, and its bustling streets were full of commerce, crowds, and *very* unpleasant scents from the masses of people and mucky streets.

### **SHAKESPEARE'S STAGE –**

In Shakespeare's day, the entertainment industry was . . . unique. One of the most popular attractions was animal-baiting, a nasty spectacle where animals were pitted against each other for show.

Theatre, fortunately, was less inhumane—but not nearly as stiff as many people expect. The plays often opened with music, and sometimes closed with a song and dance. While they could be performed in a theatre, traveling companies acted anywhere from a palace to an inn. Actors interacted with the audience, too . . . and, if the audience didn't like the play, they made it clear with verbal responses and thrown nuts. Speaking of the actors, there weren't any women. All the female characters we read would've been played by boys!

There weren't dimmed lights, either, as the plays took place in daylight or candlelight. As for seating arrangements, the average playgoer stood in front of the stage—if you had more money, *then* you were able to purchase a seat. In fact, if you were *particularly* wealthy, you could get yourself on a gallant stool onstage, flaunting your money and your great outfit to the whole crowd.

We expect fancy scenery now, but the stage in Shakespeare’s day would have been fairly bare, although costumes were often stunning. Theatres were marvels of Tudor architecture, though. Just look up the Globe, Shakespeare’s famous theatre—it’s bare-bones, but beautiful.

We can often forget that Shakespeare wasn’t the only playwright at the time, too. He was actually one of many, and multiple were higher-class and better-liked than he (at least in certain circles). In this period, Marlowe, Dekker, and Jonson are the most prominent names that you’ll encounter besides Shakespeare.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS –

Next week, we’ll be delving into Shakespeare’s writing. However, before we start reading, we would like to know your background with the Bard. But first, a quick note on our assignments: **don’t be intimidated if the assignment section looks long!** To make each assignment as straightforward and helpful as we can, we are breaking them down into steps. That can make them take up more space on the page!

### Assignment 1: Personal Reflection

**Submit a personal response of at least 300 words, answering all of the questions below. Please be honest**—you won’t be graded any differently if you don’t like Shakespeare or if you love Shakespeare! Knowing where you are right now will help us offer feedback throughout the class. Your response should demonstrate proper paragraph structure and strong writing skills.

1. **What do you think about Shakespeare?** (*Example prompt: Does the idea of reading Shakespeare all quarter make you nervous? Excited? Frustrated?*)
2. **What is your prior experience with Shakespeare?** (*Example prompt: Have you read a play before? Have you seen the movie of Romeo and Juliet?*)
3. **Have you seen a stage production live before, or do you have any other connection with theatre?** (*Example prompt: Are theatres unfamiliar to you? Did you see Phantom of the Opera live? Were you in drama club last year?*)
4. **What is your prior experience with British literature and history? If you have experience with one or either, could you give me some brief examples of what you’ve read or learned about?** (*Example prompt: Have you done a module on British literature before? Have you read other British authors—if so, which? Is this your first foray into British literature and history?*)
5. **Have you ever read Chaucer, Milton, Spenser, Austen, or another 1500s-1700s author?**



- *Don't worry, we won't be reading anyone but Shakespeare—this helps me gauge if you're familiar with reading period English.*
- *Example texts by the above authors: The Canterbury Tales, Paradise Lost, The Faerie Queene, Pride & Prejudice*

Again, if you have any questions for me now, or at any point in the class, please feel free to reach out!  
***Please remember to read and follow directions exactly!***