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# “If we shadows have offended”: Shakespeare’s “Problems” and First- Generation Students

STEPHANIE PIETROS

We seem to be divided about the value of the traditional canon. For all the canon-busting in higher education,<sup>1</sup> I see just as much ink spilt over the value and relevance of Shakespeare for younger students, usually urban students from underserved communities.<sup>2</sup> The divisions are not just between higher education and the public schools, however. Even within higher education, I have noticed a difference between the curricula at more elite institutions and at the small, regional liberal arts colleges where I have taught. While students at elite institutions are by and large not required to take single author courses or traditional surveys, even if such courses are still offered,<sup>3</sup> at the colleges at which I have taught, the curricula have required students to take not only traditional survey courses in English and American literature but also one single-author course—in Shakespeare, of course. Anecdotally, I know the same to be true from my colleagues at similar institutions. While not the subject of this paper, the differences in curricula between different institutions would make a fascinating study.

While as an early modern scholar I certainly believe in the value of studying Shakespeare, and while I have clearly benefited professionally from Shakespeare’s entrenched position in the curriculum (and hence the faculty) at many schools, I do worry about perpetuating bardolatry in my students. For despite the whittling away of the traditional canon in various arenas, Shakespeare remains, for better or worse, a cultural icon, albeit a source of frustration and consternation for many students. In my experience, students’ desire to study Shakespeare is to some extent an investment in cultural capital. As one of my students explained in her response to a question on the first day of class, she thinks it’s “pretty cool” that she can reply she’s reading Shakespeare if someone asks her. While I hope my students appreciate Shakespeare, I want to encourage them to engage critically with the plays’ form and content. This is my goal for all of my students, but it is especially important for first-generation students. In my experience, these students are less inclined to criticize an author’s cultural status and are more invested in the cultural capital that study of that author promises. In this essay, I explore the value of approaching the study of Shakespeare through the lens of “problems” and the temporal designation “problem play,” especially for high-achieving, first-generation college students.

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For the past two years, I have taught a course for first-year students called “Shakespeare’s ‘Problems’ on Film.” At the College of Mount Saint Vincent, all first-year students are allowed (though not required) to choose a freshmen seminar course, which are offered in the fall semester on a wide variety of topics in various disciplines.<sup>4</sup> These courses are expected to take a deep dive into a narrowly defined topic, and they count toward whatever area of the core is appropriate (so my course counts towards humanities/literature, which is separate from the required two-semester writing sequence that all first-year students are required to take). While a freshmen seminar is not required, most first-year students do take one. Depending on the size of the incoming class into our honors program, one or two seminars are reserved for those students. Each year that I have taught my course, it was designated for honors students.

Our student body at the College of Mount Saint Vincent is both extraordinarily diverse and contains a large percentage of first-generation students. We are a small, regional liberal arts college located in the northwest part of the Bronx, a designated Hispanic-serving institution with a large and competitive nursing program. According to our Director of Institutional Research, of traditional, full-time undergraduate students, 47% identify as first-generation college students. While there are no statistics to support this, my sense is that many who are not first-generation according to the official designation have only one parent with a degree and/or are what I would call second generation. Some students I have worked with do not identify as first-generation even though they are according to the official designation because they have a sibling who attended college. In other words, they come from families in which higher education is not deeply entrenched. In the fall of 2017, 69% of our students were female and 31% male; 42% of our full-time undergraduates were Hispanic, 25% White, 14% Black, 9% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 4% two or more ethnicities. Approximately 56% of our students are eligible for Pell Grants, a statistic that I cite because it provides a sense of socio-economic status. Many of our students are from New York City and the immediate surrounding area, and many make long commutes on multiple forms of public transit because they are unable to afford the cost of room and board.

The demographics of the two (albeit very small) seminars I have taught largely reflected those of the institution as a whole, though notably they were almost entirely female. None of the students I have yet taught intend to major in English; in fact, many are declared nursing majors. These students differ from the rest of the student body in that they are members of our honors program, which means they have exceptional high school records. They are the “good” students—attentive, diligent, and with a good sense of how the system works, even if they do not have the family know-how that continuing-generation college students are more likely to have. Although they are intellectually curious, they do, I have observed, seem to have a fear of saying the “wrong” thing. While they all come to class prepared, as evidenced by their performance on reading quizzes and when I cold-call on them in class, I sometimes feel like I am pulling teeth to get a discussion going, especially at the beginning of the semester. One of my colleagues

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notes a similar experience when he has taught honors students, which he describes as a fear of seeming “not smart” in front of one another.

I think that this phenomenon is compounded by the subject matter, both because of Shakespeare’s cultural status and because of the challenges that his language poses for even the best-prepared students. The approach my seminar takes to Shakespeare, however, has had the (initially unintended) effect of helping to break down students’ fears about Shakespeare. The idea that the works of such a “great” writer as Shakespeare have “problems,” whether in form or content, is liberating for students. It not only demystifies “Shakespeare” a bit, but also gives us a set of shared concerns with which to approach the plays and to draw upon in class discussions. It allows us to consider elements of form, structure, and genre as well as speculate about audiences both historical and contemporary.

The premise for my class is considering how film addresses the “problems” in Shakespeare’s work, whether those are issues of form (generic ambiguity, plot holes, dropped threads, inconsistencies) or content (things that an audience, particularly a modern one, finds distasteful or outright offensive). None of the three plays I teach along with film adaptations—*The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—are the three plays that originally received the designation of problem play (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida*).<sup>5</sup> However, as scholarship on the problem play reveals, the designation is fluid, with scholars at different times advocating for different criteria for inclusion in the category and/or different plays. Moreover, Felicia Hardison Londré considers “new” problem plays like *Merchant of Venice*, *Taming of the Shrew*, and *Othello*, which modern audiences find offensive or politically incorrect in some way, and suggests strategies that theater companies could use to deal with those aspects of the plays.<sup>6</sup> Londré examines two of my chosen plays; there is also a critical history of finding “problems” in *Midsummer*.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of which plays we consider problem plays, the use of “problem” as a kind of hermeneutic is one that invites students to reflect explicitly on Shakespeare’s cultural status and ultimately engage more critically with his work. Simon Barker, in his introduction to a collection of essays on problem plays, recognizes the fluidity of the term and also asserts that these plays invite reflection on the phenomenon of Shakespeare. He claims, “Plays traditionally seen as a ‘problem’ in their own right might yield new and exciting conclusions about their own status, and they might, under close examination, encourage readers to reflect upon the rest of Shakespeare’s work in a new light.”<sup>8</sup> Like Londré, he notes that certain aspects of the plays are more problematic to a contemporary audience than they might have been in Shakespeare’s time. This temporal aspect of the term, that it has signified different plays over time and continues to shift, is an especially important element of its usefulness for analysis in the course.

While my course has not yet considered any of the originally designated problem plays, the idea for the course did originate with a film adaptation for one of those plays, a 2006 adaptation of *Measure for Measure* directed by Bob Komar. While overall I find the film of little merit, I was struck upon viewing it by how it handles an aspect of the play’s ending that I find perplexing and troubling. In

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bringing the various couples together by resolving some of the outstanding conflicts, the Duke tells Isabel that they will marry, and the play concludes without any sense of how she, who intended to be a nun, responds. This film adaptation nicely mitigates any ambiguity in Isabel’s response by having Isabel give the Duke a disgusted look, shake her head, and walk off screen. No text is added to the play, but Isabel’s response to this non-proposal is quite clear. This moment inspired me to consider how other film adaptations dealt with a whole host of other moments in Shakespeare’s plays that may be similarly problematic or ambiguous.

I did not conceive of the class with my particular student body in mind. In fact, quite the opposite: my inspiration came when I was teaching Shakespeare at another institution. When the director of the core curriculum at Mount Saint Vincent asked if I had an idea for a freshmen seminar, I thought the opportunity would be a great one to consider this issue more closely than I do in the Shakespeare course I teach for English majors. In that course, I am expected to cover far more ground (six plays and some sonnets) and so have less time to consider film in-depth, though of course I always show clips of particular scenes in class.

As I have said, I chose the set of three plays that the course covers for their obviously troubling subject matter to a modern audience, particularly the misogyny of *Taming of the Shrew* and at moments in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the anti-Semitism and racism of *The Merchant of Venice*. There are a number of formal issues to consider in these plays as well. Why does the frame story of *Shrew* fall away? What can we make of the deviation from comedic plot structure that results in the act 3 marriages in *Merchant of Venice*? Is it a flaw that the marriages in *Midsummer* are dependent on Demetrius remaining under the fairies’ spell? These and other issues and questions, as well as interesting film adaptations, make this set of three plays productive for the class to consider.

In the first week of class, I give students a brief historical introduction to the theater in Shakespeare’s time, most especially so they have a sense that theater was not a revered, high culture institution but one that was often regarded suspiciously and frequently critiqued.<sup>9</sup> This helps to lay the groundwork for the rest of the class and for considering the more problematic aspects of Shakespeare’s work. In the class’s second iteration in the fall of 2018, I also assigned students to read Londré’s article, both to give some historical context for the course’s keyword “problem play” and to help them work through a scholarly article early in the semester. Most of my students, honors or otherwise, have never read a scholarly article, and so it is useful to guide them through not only a given article’s ideas but also some of the features of that genre.

Because the class covers only three plays, we can dive deeply into each, treating generally only one act per seventy-five-minute class. A slower pace helps the students as well, as they have the time to re-read if necessary and to feel they really have some mastery over the material, something that is especially important in the study of Shakespeare. Dean Clement has argued for the benefits of memorization as a means of empowering students, particularly first-generation students, and giving them confidence and pride in their study of an author so traditionally regarded as challenging as Shakespeare.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Erin K. Kelly

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writes about student-led performances in class as another means of providing students with ownership over the material.<sup>11</sup> In addition to specific graded tasks that may provide students with mastery over the material, I believe that the pace that I am permitted to take in the class helps achieve the goal of mastery over and confidence with the material.

As we are discussing the play in depth, I show students clips from live Globe productions of each play. I like using the Globe productions whenever I teach Shakespeare because they make concrete my lessons about the mechanics of Shakespeare's theater, as well as invite consideration about factors unique to any live performance. Most interesting for the consideration of problematic elements is the issue of audience reaction to something that might be troubling. Why, for example, does the audience in the Globe *Merchant of Venice* laugh at several points in the pivotal courtroom scene? What is the place for humor, if any, in such a scene? Of course, both live performances and film adaptations must make decisions about characters and scenes that have many interpretive possibilities, and those decisions inform audience response. A production may choose to underscore the violent origins of Theseus and Hippolyta's relationship with a reluctant and clearly unhappy Hippolyta in the opening scene of *Midsummer*, as we see in the Globe production. Or it may attempt to neutralize this problem as does Michael Hoffman's film by portraying the couple as much more obviously in love.

After we read each play, we consider a film adaptation or two, focused on scenes, characters, and moments that we have identified in our class discussions as particularly problematic in some way. In *Taming of the Shrew*, these include the incomplete frame story established in the induction, several scenes focusing on the interactions between Petruchio and Katherine, and Katherine's notable speech advocating for wifely submission that concludes the play. In *Merchant of Venice*, these include interaction between Shylock and Antonio, Shylock's treatment of his daughter Jessica and his response to her elopement, Portia's thoughts on and scene with the Prince of Morocco, and the pivotal courtroom scene in act 4. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we consider Theseus and Hippolyta's back story, Egeus's invocation of Athens's cruel law, Demetrius's behavior to Helena in the forest, Oberon's spell on Titania, the incomplete lifting of the spell from the Athenians, and the spectacular (or spectacularly bad) production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in act 5. In short, these plays are rife with moments we can examine through the particular lens of the course and that provide many moments for directors to interpret for a modern audience. Interestingly, both *Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* produced adaptations in the form of teen films in the late 90s/early 2000s, *10 Things I Hate About You* and the far less successful *Get Over It*. These films reinforce the class's focus on how adaptations address problematic elements for a modern audience in a unique way, focused as they are on a very specific audience, while also dealing with the conventions of a specific genre of film especially popular when they were made.

Finally, we conclude the discussion of each play with a critical article. In the class's second iteration, I focused especially on articles that considered in some way issues of canonicity and Shakespeare's status. For example, L. Monique Pittman's article on Michael Radford's adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* details

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the “deliberately ‘correct’” approach the film takes through its title screen prologue discussing the historical treatment of Jews in late-sixteenth century Venice, something that is highlighted in early scenes demonstrating this treatment, especially of Shylock. At the same time, however, the film wants to attribute a universality to Shakespeare by eliminating moments that do not contribute to the image of Shylock as a suffering, tragic character, such as his statement that he hates Antonio because he is a Christian. The article brings to the fore how directors deal with Shakespeare’s status and reputation, in this case by attempting to make him more forward-thinking than he likely was.<sup>12</sup> Working through the article’s central claim sparked a good class discussion on Shakespeare’s cultural status and how that has the potential to influence how more challenging moments in his plays are adapted for a modern audience.

The assignments for the course, while primarily focused on the skills of close reading and analysis that first year students generally need to hone (and which are emphasized in the writing course students are taking simultaneously), also seek to underscore some of the class’s key aims. In particular, the third (final) essay assignment seeks to empower students to produce an interpretation of a scene by imagining how they would stage it or adapt it in film. By this point in the course, students know that there is no one “right” way to stage Shakespeare’s plays, that there are often moments and scenes that can be interpreted in many ways, particularly the more problematic ones, and that performance can either highlight or downplay a problem. The results are not only creative and truly enjoyable to read but also demonstrate the shift in students’ thinking about Shakespeare’s status and his plays that has occurred over the course of the semester.<sup>13</sup>

Student responses to questions I pose to them both at the beginning and the end of the semester likewise provide evidence for the shifts in their thinking. On an information sheet the students fill out for me at the beginning of the semester, I ask the following questions: “What are your previous experiences with Shakespeare? What led to your decision to choose this specific freshmen seminar? Do you have any concerns with the readings or topic for this course?” In both years, all had read at least one Shakespeare play, most more than one. Many note the language of the plays as something about which they were concerned. In terms of why they chose this particular seminar, some explain that they chose it simply because of its honors designation. Several note they chose it because they were interested in considering the films more closely, which one student noted she was explicitly forbidden from doing in high school (I presume because the teachers were afraid students would watch a film without actually reading the play). One indicates that her interest in the course stemmed from her own writing and that she hoped she would learn something from analyzing and critiquing Shakespeare. Another cites admiration for the intricacies of the plays. In the second iteration of the course, I also asked students to tell me the first words that comes to mind when they hear “Shakespeare.” The results are quite illuminating: grand, drama, mystery, classic and confusing, old, plays. To me, these words suggest both the status that Shakespeare has in our culture as well as the fear that students have in approaching his work.

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On the final exam, I ask students to address the following questions: “How did the plays we studied in class this semester change your views of Shakespeare, if at all? Do you think ‘problem’ plays are worthy studying? Why or why not?” The responses confirm many of my impressions about the effect of the subject matter on them. Many respond that studying films alongside a careful and close reading of the plays was enjoyable. Some note that the class increased their admiration of “the phenomenon that is ‘Shakespeare,’” one claiming that he was surprised he was so “wowed” by Shakespeare’s writing skills. But more note a kind of opposite effect—that studying “problem” plays helped to demystify him. One explains the class made her question her prior readings of plays, as she now wonders if they had problematic aspects to them; the plays are worth studying, she went on, because people often consider them as perfect, when in fact that is far from the truth. Two note a kind of paradox that while it was useful to demystify Shakespeare, this also helped them to enjoy his plays even more: “These plays have changed my views of Shakespeare by understanding that he’s not a perfect writer and even though he is praised it is still interesting to learn about his plays” and “Problem plays are worthy of studying since it bring [sic] to light many issues that are overlooked or we ourselves did not see if we have previously read them. It also allows you to learn to enjoy Shakespeare just a bit more.” Many make a case for studying the problem plays because they allow us to learn about history and life during Shakespeare’s time. Another writes: “It made me realize that Shakespeare is overrated—just as the Mona Lisa is. He’s great, but his status as a cultural icon has idealized his works and give the notion that he’s void of imperfections. Studying the ‘problem plays’ are simply reminders that he too was human, and so his work is a reflection of his time. We must be critical in order [to] continue progressing on our portrayal of different marginalized groups.”

While I do not entirely agree with the assessment that Shakespeare is overrated, this response and the others have helped me to see the value in the approach this particular class takes to Shakespeare. Tim Francisco has argued for the value of “irrelevance” and thus of teaching Shakespeare to working-class students.<sup>14</sup> I agree, but I would underscore that *how* we teach Shakespeare, especially to first-generation, largely working-class students, is incredibly important. In this vein, Cassie Miura has argued for a reception-based approach to teaching Shakespeare as one way of laying bare the historical process of canon formation and avoiding bardolatry.<sup>15</sup> As for myself, I am always acutely aware of my position as an authority figure and how, as such, I want to try to foster critical thinking about the issues in Shakespeare’s plays rather than blind admiration for, to quote the long-standing catalog entry (which I did not write) for the Shakespeare class for majors at my school, “the greatest writer in the English language.” Shakespeare’s plays may hold relevance for the present, but as the responses from my students indicate, they also remind us just how different his time was from our own, even if some of the issues they raise, like anti-Semitism, racism, and misogyny, still exist in some form. The lens of the “problem play” engenders this fruitful cross-temporal view that opens up many important avenues of discussion. Ultimately, I want my students to realize that even if we can still read and appreciate Shakespeare today, he was thoroughly of his time, and we

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should honor our own cultural and historical position by acknowledging the “problems” in his plays.

### Notes

1. Valerie Strauss, “Students Remove Shakespeare Portrait from English Department at Ivy League School,” *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/12/13/students-remove-shakespeare-portrait-from-english-department-at-ivy-league-school/?utm\\_term=.4ff95c62a3f2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/12/13/students-remove-shakespeare-portrait-from-english-department-at-ivy-league-school/?utm_term=.4ff95c62a3f2).

2. Robert Silverman, “Shakespeare’s Modern Lessons for New York Schoolkids,” *The Daily Beast*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/shakespeares-modern-lessons-for-new-york-schoolkids>.

3. See the 2015 report from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which found that of 52 elite institutions surveyed, only four required English majors to take a dedicated Shakespeare course. American Council of Trustees and Alumni, *The Unkindest Cut: Shakespeare in Exile 2015*, April 23, 2015, <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/local/the-unkindest-cut/1523/>.

4. While I personally would prefer the gender-neutral term “first-year,” I am keeping with the terminology my institution applies to these courses with the term “freshmen seminar.”

5. Vivian Thomas, in her 1987 book, reviews and synthesizes the literature on the problem play to date, going back to Edward Dowden who began the process of linking these three plays in 1875. Thomas precisely identifies a dozen important connections among the group of three and ultimately defines the term thusly: “The term problem play is here used to encompass three plays which defy absorption into the traditional categories of romantic comedies, histories, tragedies and romances, but share striking affinities in terms of themes, atmosphere, tone and style. In particular, they explore fundamental problems relating to personal and social values within a framework which makes the audience acutely aware of the problems without providing amelioration through the provision of adequate answers or a dramatic mode which facilitates a satisfactory release of emotions.” See Vivian Thomas, *The Moral Universe of Shakespeare’s Problem Plays* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987), 21. Subsequent critics have sought to make the term more capacious, either in terms of criteria or in terms of plays. See David Margolies, *Shakespeare’s Irrational Endings: The Problem Plays* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); A.G. Harmon, *Eternal Bonds, True Contracts: Law and Nature in Shakespeare’s Problem Plays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Neil Rhodes, “The Controversial Plot: Declamation and the Concept of the ‘Problem Play,’” *Modern Language Review* 95.3 (2000): 209-622; and David McCandless, *Gender and Performance in Shakespeare’s Problem Comedies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997).

6. Felicia Hardison Londré, “Confronting Shakespeare’s ‘Political Incorrectness’ in Production: Contemporary American Audiences and the New ‘Problem Plays,’” *On-Stage Studies* 19 (1996): 67-82.

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7. Peter C. Herman, "Equity and the Problem of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Or, the Ancient Constitution in Ancient Athens," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 14.1 (2014): 4-31.
8. Simon Barker, ed., *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 9.
9. See Appendix 1 below for excerpts from my syllabus, particularly the course schedule laying out the structure I have detailed above.
10. William Dean Clement, "L(E)arned Empowerment: Memorizing Shakespeare for First Generation Students," in this volume.
11. Erin K. Kelly, "Mutual Meaning Making: Dramatic Staging and Student-Led Discussion in the Shakespeare Classroom," in this volume.
12. L. Monique Pittman, "Locating the Bard: Adaptation and Authority in Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 25.2 (2007): 13-33.
13. See Appendix 2 for the assignment sheet from this final essay assignment and Appendix 3 for the essay questions from my exams for the course.
14. Tim Francisco, "Shakespeare and Working-Class Students: The Value of Irrelevance," *Working-Class Perspectives*, October 10, 2016, <https://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/2016/10/10/shakespeare-and-working-class-students-the-value-of-irrelevance/>.
15. Cassie M. Miura, "Teaching First-Generation Students: Bardolatry and the Shakespeare Survey," in this volume.

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### APPENDIX 1: Syllabus Excerpts (Fall 2018)

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The term "problem play" has been applied to various plays of Shakespeare. Whether the generic classification, a plot hole, or misogynistic, homophobic or anti-Semitic stance that might be offensive, these issues are, generally speaking, problems for a contemporary, not early modern, audience. Film adaptations, in order to appeal to contemporary tastes, work to mitigate these problems. In this course, we will focus on three of Shakespeare's plays that have often been deemed problematic and examine how films have adapted them to suit modern audiences.

#### COURSE SCHEDULE:

\*\*Reading and writing assignments should be completed by the start of the class in which they are listed below. Detailed information about all writing assignments and how to submit them will be distributed\*\*

W 8/29 Introductions & syllabus

F 8/31 Felicia Hardison Londré, “Confronting Shakespeare’s ‘Political Incorrectness’ in Production: Contemporary American Audiences and the New ‘Problem Plays’” (Canvas)

W 9/5 *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act 1

F 9/7 *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act 2

W 9/12 *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act 3

F 9/14 *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act 4

W 9/19 *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act 5

F 9/21 *The Taming of the Shrew*, dir. Franco Zeffirelli

W 9/26 *10 Things I Hate About You*, dir. Gil Junger **Essay #1 due**

F 9/28 Christopher Bertucci, “Rethinking Binaries by Recovering Bianca in *10 Things I Hate About You* and Zeffirelli’s *The Taming of the Shrew*” (Canvas)

W 10/3 **Exam #1**

F 10/5 *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1

W 10/10 *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 2

F 10/12 *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 3

W 10/17 *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4

F 10/19 *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 5

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W 10/24 *The Merchant of Venice*, dir. Michael Radford **Essay #2 due**  
F 10/26 L. Monique Pittman, “Locating the Bard: Adaptation and Authority in Michael Radford’s *The Merchant of Venice*” (Canvas)

W 10/31 **Exam #2**  
F 11/2 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 1

W 11/7 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 2  
F 11/9 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 3

W 11/14 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 4  
F 11/16 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 5

W 11/21 & F 11/23 NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING BREAK

W 11/28 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, dir. Michael Hoffman  
F 11/30 *Get Over It*, dir. Tommy O’Haver

W 12/5 Stephen M. Buhler, “Textual and Sexual Anxieties in Michael Hoffman’s Film of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” (Canvas) **Essay #3 due**  
F 12/7 Wrapping up & review

In keeping with College Policy, the Final Exam (Exam #3) will be scheduled during the Final Week (December 10-15).

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### APPENDIX 2: Final Essay Assignment (Fall 2018)

#### Essay #3

For this essay, you will choose a scene from a play we have read this semester and imagine how you would stage that scene either on the stage or in a film adaptation. In a description of approximately 1000-1250 words, describe your concept for the scene including the costumes, set, lighting, and props. Explain how you would direct the actors: what emotions you would want them to convey, any lines you would cut, and other details about how they should act. If you'd like, you can even describe your dream cast of actors. You have license to be as creative as you wish, so if you want to set *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the moon, feel free! Just remember, you need to explain how each of your production choices relates to your interpretation of the play. You may prepare visuals of some kind if you wish, but they are by no means necessary.

- **Prewriting (due Wednesday 11/28):** In a paragraph or two, tell me which scene you plan to work with and why you think it would make an interesting scene for staging. In choosing a scene, you may want to think about some of the more problematic or sticky moments in the plays we've read, as well as how the various film adaptations we've studied address such moments.
- **Optional Draft (due Monday 12/3):** Drafts should be received by email by 5 pm on the due date in order for me to guarantee timely feedback. I also encourage you to meet with me in my office and/or bring your essay to the ARC at any point in the writing process.
- **Final Draft (due Friday 12/7):** Please submit your essay in hard copy as well as upload it to turnitin.com. Please staple the submission receipt from turnitin to the top of your hard copy. The class ID for turnitin is 18807368, and the enrollment key is pietros.

#### Appendix 3: Exam Questions (fall 2018)

1. From *Taming of the Shrew* exam (Choice of 2)
  - a. Consider how performance opens up possibilities for new interpretations of characters or other aspects of the play.
  - b. Consider how film adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* reveal the values of the time in which they were produced, rather than those of Shakespeare's time.

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2. From *Merchant of Venice* exam (Choice of 2)

- a. *The Merchant of Venice* deviates from the typical structure of Shakespearean comedy by having the marriages occur before the very end of the play, and thus acts 4-5 are concerned with other elements of the plot. First, explain what the play concerns itself with in its final acts and then consider the following questions. Is it a “problem” the ends somewhat atypically? Why or why not? How does the deviation from comedic structure impact other elements of the plot? Is the play successfully able to shift the focus back to the love plots at its very end? You may address the text of the play as well as any film adaptations you see fit in your response.
- b. *The Merchant of Venice* contains plot elements and viewpoints, such as anti-Semitism, homophobia, racism, and misogyny, that may be particularly troubling to a modern audience. Some directors might attempt to keep those elements in the play, both to be historically accurate and to force audiences to have to deal with these uncomfortable moments. Others might choose to leave out or modify these details in order to make the play more palatable to a modern audience. What problematic aspects of the plays do you think should be kept in modern adaptations and why? Which should be left out or softened and why? You may address the texts of the plays as well as any of the film adaptations we considered in class in your response.

3. From *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (final) exam

Consider the three plays that we studied this semester, including related stage and film adaptations. What elements in these plays might lead to the designation of “problem play”? Do you think this is a useful term? Why or why not? What continues to appeal to directors and audiences in these plays despite their more problematic elements?