



Yeshiva University  
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS  
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

## **Shakespeare: Politics and the Human Condition**

Yeshiva University, Stern College for Women (Honors)

Political Science / English

Monday 6:00-8:30

### **Course Description**

This course examines central themes of political philosophy through a close reading of six Shakespearean plays: Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Merchant of Venice and Othello. We will look at such themes as the nature of the political regime and its influence on culture and behaviour; the character of ancient republicanism; the relationship between politics and violence; the source of civic and personal greatness; the causes of political decline; the relationship of philosophy and politics; and the nature of political ambition. The first half of the course will be dedicated to Shakespeare's depiction of the rise and fall of the Roman Republic. The Second part of the course, building on Antony and Cleopatra, will first examine love as an escape and alternative to political life. Then we turn to Venice as exemplary of the modern commercial republic, as opposed to Rome as an ancient military republic. Themes in the second part of the course will be religion and the state, law and violence, and the place of private passions like revenge, hate, and love in politics.

### **Learning Objectives**

This is a course in the Humanities. Its goal is first and foremost to help us understand and analyze human life by reading great works of literature. We will focus primarily on close reading and textual analysis. We will spend the majority of our time analyzing character, plot, language, and thematics. This is also a course in the subfield of Political Theory and Philosophy within the discipline of Political Science. Courses in this subfield deal with the study of the history of ancient and modern political philosophy and its influence in shaping and understanding the Western political tradition; they also debate and discuss concepts such as justice, liberty, sovereignty, citizenship, oppression, tyranny, revolution, war and empire, and the relationship between religion and politics. You will encounter many of these themes in this course.

## **Grading**

Class Participation: 10%

Memorization/Performance Project: 10% (1-2 pages)

Midterm Paper: 30% (7 pages)

Final Paper: 50% (13 pages)

## **Assignments**

*Memorization Assignment:* Shakespeare is meant to be performed, and memorizing poetry is beneficial to your mental health. Alone or together in a group of two or three, you will be expected to memorize at least 20 lines (per person if in a group) of your favourite scene from one play and perform it in class. You will be expected to also submit a 1-2 page paper in which, speaking in the first person, you describe why you performed the 20 lines as you did. More detailed instructions to be handed out in class.

## **A note on Reading Shakespeare**

Reading Shakespeare is not easy. It takes time and patience and a dictionary. You might find it helpful to read a synopsis of the play before you read the text, though of course a synopsis in no way replaces the text. You may also find it helpful to watch films of the plays in addition to reading them, first since they are meant to be performed, and second, because it will help you understand the dramatic action.

## **Secondary Literature on Shakespeare**

Blits, *The End of the Ancient Republic*

Bloom, Allan. *Shakespeare's Politics*

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*

Brower, *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition*

Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire*

Charney, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays*

Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*

Girard, René. *A Theater of Envy*



Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespeare's Freedom*

Huffman, *Coriolanus in Context*

Kahn, Roman. *Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women*

Kermode, Frank. *The Age of Shakespeare*

Knight, *The Imperial Theme: Further Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies*

Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome*

Nuttal, A.D. *Shakespeare the Thinker*

Platt, *Rome and Romans According to Shakespeare*

Simmons, *Shakespeare's Pagan World: The Roman Tragedies*

Spencer, *William Shakespeare: The Roman Plays*

### **Schedule of Readings**

Ideally you will read the entire play before the week we begin discussing it and read it again before the second discussion week.

August 25th No Class Makeup TBD

September 1 Coriolanus

September 8 Coriolanus

September 15th to October 6th No class

October 13 Julius Caesar

October 20 Julius Caesar

October 27 Antony and Cleopatra

November 3 Antony and Cleopatra

November 10 Midsummer Night's Dream

November 17 Midsummer Night's Dream

November 24 Merchant of Venice

December 1 Merchant of Venice

December 15 Othello

December 23 (Wednesday) Othello