

Shakespeare's Central Tragedies

We'll read—slowly and sympathetically-- four of the greatest plays ever written: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, paying close attention both to language and stage values. These tragedies are chronologically central in Shakespeare's career; more significantly, they are culturally central, definitive documents in a shared imaginative experience. These are explosive images: A man in black, holding a skull, contemplating the ravages of time and the nature of his own consciousness; a lone black man surrounded by whites, and on the bed a murdered white woman; a dagger dripping blood, summoning a man and woman to commit a murder which will become, also, the killing of their own humanity; a nearly-naked old man, once a mighty ruler, now battling wind and rain, crying for justice to unhearing gods: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life / And thou no breath at all?" Each of these plays raises enormous questions about fundamental issues, and offers, not answers, but dramatic ways to engage them.

As our own central (but not exclusive) issue we'll consider Shakespeare's creation of the interiorized self. "I have that *within* which passes show," Hamlet claims. Shakespeare's tragic human characters are discoverable not only in social terms (I am a king, I am a beggar), or in religious terms (I have a soul), but also in their own self-questioning. Lear *is* by virtue of his need to ask "Who am I?" Othello demands to know *how* he knows or, tragically, fails to know himself in his world.

We'll occasionally read aloud in class, and analyze the plays' sometimes knotty, sometimes luminous dialogue. (Folks who haven't read any Shakespeare in a while are especially welcome.) We'll listen to the startling brilliance of Shakespeare's language of metaphor; and we'll pay attention to dramatic structure and scenic design.

I'll do a bit of lecturing and ask participants to interrupt me if they can: your participation is central to the enterprise. Our texts will be the individual volumes of the Pelican Shakespeare. Editions of Shakespeare's plays differ widely, even in basic things like lineation. It will save lots of time in class if we're all literally on the same page. I'll ask Labyrinth Books to stock the plays in the downstairs textbook area; but the easiest way to get them is via Amazon. Here's information to make ordering easier: *Hamlet*, ed. Braunmuller, ISBN 978-014312854-0; *Othello*, ed. McDonald, 978-014312861-8; *King Lear* ed. Orgel, 978-0143128557; *Macbeth*, ed. Orgel, 978-0143128564

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Tuesdays: 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., 8 weeks: February 26 through April 16

Location: PSRC