Political life is a ubiquitous theme in literature. Issues such as power, justice, equality, and rights have long been illuminated by great writers. At least as far back as the ancient Greeks, politics and commentary on society generally have figured prominently in literature. Much of that work, of course, may be found in novels. From Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, to modern works, such as William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln*, and Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, authors have used literature as a mechanism for illuminating issues of authority, corruption, and problems with the social order.

Some of the most important examples of politics in literature, however, have been written for the theater. Euripides and Aristophanes were among the first to bring politics to the stage. And today, modern writers such as David Hare, David Mamet, and Harold Pinter have written plays with an eye towards offering social criticism.

Clearly, however, William Shakespeare is the dramatist who, perhaps more than any other, made issues of politics and society key themes within his work. In plays ranging from histories to comedies, he had a good deal to say about topics as diverse as political ambition, executive decision making, and leadership. *Richard II* documents the fate of a willful leader who is out of touch with the citizenry. *Othello* provides insight into questions of not only political treachery but race relations, as well. *King Lear* presents the downfall of a monarch who allows flattery to supplant good judgment. *Coriolanus* charts the problems associated with military leadership. *Julius Caesar* points out the conflict between loyalty and ambition. *Macbeth* highlights the consequences of lust for power. *The Taming of the Shrew* speaks directly to the question of gender equality. *The Merchant of Venice* considers the question of justice under the law, set against a backdrop of anti-Semitism. Taken together, Shakespeare’s works, as one leading scholar argues, “[show] most vividly and comprehensively the fate of tyrants, the character of good rulers, the relations of friends, and the duties of citizens.”

In this class, we will begin to explore some of these issues. You will read, view, and discuss a number of Shakespeare’s plays, examining them from a political perspective. Moreover, you will be asked to consider the contemporary relevance of these plays. To aid in your thinking, you will read some original political philosophy as well as scholarly analysis of some of the themes that the plays address. The principal goal of the class is not to consider Shakespeare’s plays as works of literature but rather to think critically about some important political ideas, using Shakespeare as a
lens through which to view them.

Books

We will be reading five of Shakespeare’s plays in this class. These plays are in the public domain and thus widely available in a number of different formats. I would encourage you to obtain hard copies of these plays, either individually or in an edition of collected works. My own preference is for the “No Fear Shakespeare” volumes, and thus I have ordered copies of these editions (with the exception of Measure for Measure) from the Student Stores. The following books are available for purchase there:


For those who prefer a complete edition of Shakespeare’s work, the following is a very nice, inexpensive volume:


Format and Grades

As a seminar, this class will require students to take a leading role in our regular class meetings. My plan is to provide an outline for the course and a structure to our regular meetings, with a minimum of lecturing. Beyond that, I will ask you to guide us through the materials, to stimulate our thinking, and to generate insights. To that end, I will ask you to work in small groups to prepare a brief presentation on the issues that concern our reading selections before each class period. In addition, I will expect that each of you will come to class prepared to discuss and pose questions about the material. For all obvious reasons, therefore, your preparation and attendance are necessary, if this seminar is to be successful. (Attendance in class, though, is not formally required.)
You will also have two written assignments during the semester. One will be a short paper (of approximately 3-5 pages) on a topic to be announced. The other will be a longer paper (10-15 pages), which will be due late in the semester, on a topic of your own choice — subject to my approval. Your grade will be determined based on the following: group presentations (20%), class participation (10%), short topical paper (30%), and individual paper (40%).

**Outline of the Course**

1. Political Character and Leadership

The sequence of plays that includes *Henry IV* and *Henry V* are plays that concern the qualities of political leadership. Who should serve in government? What types of persons ought to be in political life, and what life experiences make them more (or less) qualified than others to govern?

**Readings:**

*Henry IV, Part 1*

- Act 1  (January 12)
- Act 2  (January 17)
- Act 3  (January 19)
- Acts 4 & 5  (January 24)

Greenstein, “The Uneven Leadership of Harry S. Truman” & “The Undisciplined Bill Clinton”  (January 26)

*Henry IV, Part 2*

- Acts 1 & 2  (January 31)
- Act 3  (February 2)
- Act 4  (February 7)
- Act 5  (February 9)

Greenstein, “The Virtuosic Leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt” & “The Unexpected Eisenhower”  (February 14)

*Henry V*

- Acts 1 & 2  (February 16)
- Act 3  (February 21)
- Act 4  (February 23)
- Act 5  (February 28)

Greenstein, “Coming to Terms with Kennedy” & “Ronald Reagan: The Innocent as Agent of Change”  (March 1)
4. Ambition and Corruption

Richard III is a play about the desire and consequences of a blind ambition for power. Political leaders must always face the problem of how to corral and employ their natural desire to control policy while resisting corrupting tendency that often accompanies power (especially unchecked power). How can a state promote the best qualities in its policymakers, while controlling their human weaknesses?

Readings:

Richard III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(March 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>(March 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>(March 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>(March 22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>(March 27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Machiavelli, The Prince (March 29 – April 5)

3. Justice

As a morality tale, Measure for Measure is an examination of the question of justice v. mercy. How strictly should the law be interpreted, and what is to be done when a strict interpretation results in what most would regard as an unjust outcome? When should the law offer forgiveness? Although this play is technically one of Shakespeare’s comedies, it is a serious contemplation of what it means to enforce the letter of the law.

Readings:

Measure for Measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acts</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>(April 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>(April 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 &amp; 5</td>
<td>(April 19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>