

## Peace and War in Shakespeare and his Age

English 524A / English 497 001

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### Description

The course will examine eleven plays --- nine by William Shakespeare and two by Christopher Marlowe --- in both critical and historical contexts. Each week features three readings: a play, a contemporary intertext and a critical or theoretical essay. Not only does this format underline the importance of historical context, but also it will allow us to examine whether Shakespeare would have had access to positive ideas of peace, and not just a negative understanding of peace as the absence of war. This course therefore extends beyond literature to the history of ideas; moreover, it challenges the assumption, made overt by Thomas Hobbes but implicit in much current literary criticism and intellectual life generally, that war constitutes the natural state of humankind. At the broadest level, the course will address the question of whether we are obliged to identify peace with passivity, inauthenticity, or even cowardice or laziness, or can think of it as a state of human flourishing.

While drawing upon both critical theory and the history of ideas, however, this course finds its focus in a series of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century dramas, most of which were very popular but will nevertheless be new to the students. The course begins with a survey of the English history play, a short-lived but enormously popular genre, which Shakespeare pioneered. In keeping with Hegel's dictum that periods of peace and happiness are only blank pages in history, the three parts of *Henry VI* concern themselves almost entirely with war, often internecine. Whether they therefore also praise or naturalize war will be discussed by comparison with Nicolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, an Elizabethan homily against rebellion and a jingoistic poem. More generally, these first plays raise the question of how critics have read pacifist ideas in or against the Shakespearean text.

The three parts of *Henry VI* will be followed by Marlowe's only significant essay of the same genre, *Edward II*, best remembered as a gay classic, in which England is torn between two homosocial groups: the warrior aristocracy and the king's theatrical court. A historical intertext by Michel de la Montaigne will open discussion of whether friendship functions as a benign influence, over and against war, or as a malign influence, subverting law and the state. The course will then step out of chronological order, placing *Tamburlaine the Great, Part 1*, in juxtaposition to *Henry V*, in order to show the difference between two depictions of war, in Marlovian tragedy and mature Shakespearean history. Both will be placed within the context of contemporary discussions of glory and military law. Whether, as James Shapiro claims, *Henry V* represents a new and more skeptical view of war on the Shakespearean stage, will also be the subject of class debate.

*Henry V* also serves as a bridge into the mature works, such as *Troilus and Cressida*, taken by Steven Marx to represent the turning point between a militarist and young Shakespeare and a

pacifist older Shakespeare. This argument has been contested by Robert S. White, whose work is placed against *Antony and Cleopatra*. Both plays will be compared to other early modern depictions of the same events, to illustrate in which ways Shakespeare's treatment is new or innovative.

The last group of plays, from late in Shakespeare's career, are placed in the context not of critics, but of two recently-deceased continental philosophers with a particular interest in peace. The title character of *Coriolanus* conflates war with authenticity itself. His play can be usefully read against Thomas Hobbes's celebrated description of the state of nature, itself critiqued by Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur's work on Utopianism allows a reading of *The Tempest*, and its echo of Montaigne's "On the Cannibals." Finally, *Henry VIII* (co-authored with John Fletcher) both begins and ends with depictions of peace. The first scene contains an elaborate description of the field of the cloth of gold, itself an elaborate treaty-making ceremony highly influenced by Cardinal Wolsey's reading of humanist ideals of peace. The play ends with a prophecy over the infant Elizabeth I, as a harbinger of peace, which anticipates James I's self-presentation as a peacemaker. The course therefore ends with a debate between different ideas of how peace is to be understood and obtained. A similar debate between different ideas of peace dominates the opening pages of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, with which the course concludes.

### Method of Assessment

Like most graduate courses, this seminar will build towards a major term paper, of between fifteen and twenty pages in length. The term paper will, however, be anticipated by a prospectus, in part as a means of assessing whether the topic of the term paper is practicable. Finally, students will be expected to make three seminar presentations, one each on a play, an intertext and a critic or philosopher.

Seminar on a Play	10
Seminar on an Intertext	10
Seminar on a Critic	10
Prospectus	10
Term Paper	50
Class Participation	10

### Weekly Syllabus

Week	Play	Sixteenth or Seventeenth Century Intertext	Critic or Theorist
1	Introduction		

2	<i>Henry VI, Part 1</i>	Michael Drayton, "Ballad of Agincourt"	Laurence Lerner, "Peace Studies: A Proposal"
3	<i>Henry VI, Part 2</i>	"Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion"	E.M.W. Tillyard, selections
4	<i>Henry VI, Part 3</i>	Machiavelli, <i>The Prince</i> , selections	John Roe, selections
5	<i>Edward II</i>	Montaigne, "On Friendship"	Alan Shepard, selections
6	<i>Tamburlaine the Great, Part 1</i>	Montaigne, "One is Punished for Defending a Place Obstinate Without Reason" and "Whether the Governor of a Besieged Place Should Go out to Parley"	Theodore Meron, selections
7	<i>Henry V</i>	Bacon "Of Empire" and "Of Seditions and Troubles"	James Shapiro, selection from <i>1599: A Year in the Life of Shakespeare</i>
8	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	Rage of Achilles from Chapman's Homer	Steven Marx
9	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	Plutarch, "Antony"	Robert S. White
10	<i>Coriolanus</i>	Thomas Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> , selections	Paul Ricoeur, <i>The Course of Recognition</i> , selections.
11	<i>The Tempest</i>	Montaigne, "On the Cannibals"	Paul Ricoeur, <i>Lectures on Ideology and Utopia</i> , selections.
12	<i>Henry VIII</i>	Erasmus, <i>The Complaint of Peace</i>	Levinas, opening pages of <i>Totality and Infinity</i>
13	Conclusion		

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