ENGLISH 685 (HU)
Shakespeare and the Art of Government

Professor Mark Netzloff, Department of English
Section 001, Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:30-10:45, HON 180

Readings:


Extracts from early modern political theorists such as Machiavelli, Montaigne, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke (D2L).

Viewing:

Clips from stage and film productions of the plays. Contingent on schedule, local stage productions and live screenings from the National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company.

Course Description:

Four hundred years ago, Shakespeare’s plays were performed in a unique venue: a public theater that brought together thousands of spectators to see and evaluate the decisions of political leaders from classical Roman and English history to contemporary political figures. In a period before the advent of journalism, political parties and other features of a modern public, the theater offered a political education for its mass audience. The unique dynamics of performance provided a medium for representing competing models of the political forms that organize communities. In recognizing the art of government, a critical public became equipped to imagine alternative political ideas and render their judgment on leaders who failed to govern well.

At the same time that theater outlined an art of government, political thinkers of the early modern period began to define many of the political ideas central to our modern era. Theater and political theory were in a mutually constitutive dialogue: like his predecessor Machiavelli, Shakespeare provided a descriptive, often cynical analysis of the workings of power. Theorists were similarly influenced by the framework of dramatic representation: Thomas Hobbes, for instance, figured the conferral of political right as analogous to dramatic performance; in assuming sovereign authority, a ruler assumes a persona and becomes an artificial person, like an actor taking on a role as “counterfeited on the stage.”

Course requirements:

Active participation – 20%
Presentation/leading of discussion – 10%
Response papers (1-page, posted to D2L; 7 in all) – 30%
Final research paper (10-12 pp.) – 40%