Course Description:

This course provides an introductory survey of Shakespeare’s works through a focused study of a selection of his comedies. We will be discussing the following plays: The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Merchant of Venice, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Twelfth Night, Troilus and Cressida, Measure for Measure, and The Tempest. Our selections encompass a range of subgenres and cover plays written throughout the stages of Shakespeare’s theatrical career.

All of Shakespeare’s comedies are, in a sense, problem plays, texts that use the generic framework of comedy to grapple with crucial social issues. And while the pleasures of comedy stem from its ability to question dominant models of social relations and imaginatively elaborate alternative frameworks, it also serves a normalizing role in enforcing standards of social order, particularly in relation to gender roles and definitions of sexuality. Attentive to the ambivalent workings of comedy, we will focus particularly on the contexts and problems it addresses: marriage, the household, family, and private sphere, as well as class, religion, economics, sexuality, war, the law, and colonialism.

Complementing our close reading of the plays, we will also be situating the texts in relation to their literary, theatrical, and historical contexts. Because Shakespeare wrote his plays for performance rather than publication, we will pay particular attention to the cultural importance of the early modern theater. In addition, we will examine the ways these texts have been reinterpreted over time by looking at the plays in performance and on film.

This semester we will also have the opportunity to see live screenings of two productions from the Royal Shakespeare Company: Merry Wives of Windsor (September, date tbd) and Troilus and Cressida (November, date tbd).

Course work will consist of reading quizzes (8 in all) along with a final 8-10 page research paper.

Please feel free to contact Professor Netzloff (netzloff@uwm.edu) with any questions about the course.