

Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies

(36 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)

Course No. 280

Taught by [Peter Saccio](#)

Dartmouth College

Ph.D., Princeton University

Three reviews capture the essence of this course on Shakespeare's plays:

"Professor Saccio goes well beyond merely introducing the plays of Shakespeare in 36 lectures.

"First, he locates them in the context of their time and world, suggesting not only what their author might be doing in them but also why.

Second, he gives us a solid grasp of each of the major plays in the three genres with a careful look at the critical issues surrounding each. Finally, he shares with us his intimate feel for the characters, their motivations, and the deep-seated passions which drive the play.

"Sparkling with excitement, writer and award-winning teacher Peter Saccio converts his vast scholarship to breathing life. Though passion and love of the study never replace careful planning and organization, they permeate each lecture from start to finish, offering the listener an exciting challenge."

—*AudioFile*® magazine

"[The Teaching Company] defines 'SuperStars' as 'great understanders, explainers, synthesizers, enthusiasts, communicators—and, yes, entertainers.'

"Professor Saccio certainly fits the bill. A dark, intense man with a closely cropped beard and a commanding voice, he intersperses his taped lectures with dramatic readings. When the mad Lear and the blind Gloucester meet at Dover Beach during Act IV of *King Lear*, Professor Saccio, a sometime actor, squats on the stage and plays both roles...

"Professor Saccio was entertaining, wise and witty."

—Linda Mathews, *The New York Times*

"I have taught and loved Shakespeare for over 30 years and was captivated and stunned by Peter Saccio's eloquence and knowledge of the material."

—Rayna Goldfarb, Philadelphia, PA

William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies introduces the plays of Shakespeare and explains the achievement that makes Shakespeare the leading playwright in

Western civilization. The key to that achievement is his "abundance," not only the number of plays he wrote and the length of each one, but also the variety of human experiences they depict, the multitude of actions and characters they contain, the combination of public and private life they deal with, the richness of feelings they express and can provoke in an audience and in readers, and the fullness of language and suggestion.

Introduction: Lectures 1 through 2

- The first two lectures consider how Shakespeare's plays have been found valuable by four centuries of readers, and how they have been interpreted and reinterpreted by the generations who have read and seen them.
- The lectures also consider the kind of theater for which he wrote, the characteristic structures of his plays, and the way the plays easily mingle events from different realms: different social levels, different levels of realism, and different metaphysical contexts.

The course then proceeds to consider the plays in terms of genre.

Four Comedies: Lectures 3 through 10

- *Twelfth Night* offers an example of basic Shakespearean comic structure and subject matter: courtship by several young couples. Renaissance courtship practices are discussed, together with their implications about the place of romantic love in human life as a whole. Shakespeare also includes in his survey of lovers Malvolio the ambitious steward, for whom courtship is a means of social advancement.
- *The Taming of the Shrew* provides a more realistic look at bourgeois marriage customs and the place of a strong woman in a patriarchal society. It shows Shakespeare experimenting with an unusually sharp collision of romance and farce.
- *The Merchant of Venice* entails a particularly lofty form of romantic idealism in the courtship plot, but it confronts that idealism with the problematic, possibly tragic character of Shylock, who has forced generations of actors into reinterpretation of Shakespeare.
- *Measure for Measure* shows Shakespeare on the verge of breaking out of comic conventions altogether. The characters marry at the end, as is customary, but the route to their unions is a gritty path entailing near-rape and near-execution via the courtrooms and the sexual underground of a corrupt modern society.

Five Histories: Lectures 11 through 18

- *Richard III* is followed through the arc of his villainous and entertaining career.
- *Richard II* raises constitutional problems that vex us still: what can be done with a ruler who is undoubtedly entitled to rule and is also damaging the realm?
- The two plays named after *Henry IV* show Shakespeare's widest scope in depicting the realm of England from throne room to tavern to countryside, and they introduce Shakespeare's most remarkable comic creation, Falstaff.

- In *Henry V*, Shakespeare kills Falstaff in a scene of extraordinary artistic skill and emotional effect, and then takes the king to a military victory that still arouses all our conflicted convictions about the morality of warfare.

Seven Tragedies: Lectures 19 through 36

- The lectures show Shakespeare taking *Romeo and Juliet*, who should be the leading pair of lovers in a comedy, and plunging their private bliss into the public violence of a city torn by feud.
- Why ancient Rome was important to Shakespeare (and to the Renaissance as a whole) is explored in two lectures on *Julius Caesar*.
- Two lectures on *Troilus and Cressida* show Shakespeare rewriting Homer into a bitter satire on vainglorious men and unfaithful women.
- Finally, three lectures apiece are devoted to each of the four greatest tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. As the richness of each play is explored, emphasis falls on the scope of the tragic effect: Shakespeare's acute development of the inner consciousness in his tragic soliloquies is placed within the far-ranging philosophical and theological implications of tragic events for the whole of human life.

As with his students at Dartmouth, Professor Saccio expects his listeners and viewers to have some familiarity with the plays (he does not waste time on basic plot summary). He provides the critical tools necessary for the appreciation of Shakespeare's world, his artistry, his significance, and his emotional power.

A Great Professor

Peter Saccio (Ph.D., Princeton University) is the Leon D. Black Professor of Shakespearean Studies at Dartmouth College. Professor Saccio has taught Shakespeare at Dartmouth since 1966, where he is the recipient of Dartmouth's J. Kenneth Huntington Memorial Award for Outstanding Teaching.

Among other books and dozens of scholarly articles, he is the author of *Shakespeare's English Kings* (1977), a recognized classic in its field.

Professor Saccio is also a trained actor. He has performed the Shakespearean roles of Casca, Angelo, Bassanio, and Henry IV, and has directed productions of *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline*.

Course Lecture Titles

Part 1

1. Shakespeare Then and Now
2. The Nature of Shakespeare's Plays
3. *Twelfth Night*—Shakespearean Comedy
4. *Twelfth Night*—Malvolio in Love
5. *The Taming of the Shrew*—Getting Married in the 1590s
6. *The Taming of the Shrew*—Farce and Romance
7. *The Merchant of Venice*—Courting the Heiress
8. *The Merchant of Venice*—Shylock
9. *Measure for Measure*—Sex in Society
10. *Measure for Measure*—Justice and Comedy
11. *Richard III*—Shakespearean History
12. *Richard III*—The Villain's Career

Part 2

13. *Richard II*—The Theory of Kingship
14. *Richard II*—The Fall of the King
15. *Henry IV*—All the King's Men
16. *Henry IV*—The Life of Falstaff
17. *Henry V*—The Death of Falstaff
18. *Henry V*—The King Victorious
19. *Romeo and Juliet*—Shakespearean Tragedy
20. *Romeo and Juliet*—Public Violence and Private Bliss
21. *Troilus and Cressida*—Ancient Epic in a New Mode
22. *Troilus and Cressida*—Heroic Aspirations
23. *Julius Caesar*—The Matter of Rome
24. *Julius Caesar*—Heroes of History

Part 3

25. *Hamlet*—The Abundance of the Play
26. *Hamlet*—The Causes of Tragedy
27. *Hamlet*—The Protestant Hero
28. *Othello*—The Design of the Tragedy
29. *Othello*—"O Villainy!"
30. *Othello*—"The Noble Moor"
31. *King Lear*—"This Is the Worst"
32. *King Lear*—Wisdom Through Suffering
33. *King Lear*—"Then We Go On"
34. *Macbeth*—"Fair Is Foul"
35. *Macbeth*—Musing on Murder
36. *Macbeth*—"Enter Two Murderers"