

HERTOG 2022 POLITICAL STUDIES PROGRAM

SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR* & *THE TEMPEST*

Mary Nichols, Professor Emerita, Baylor University

Fellows will examine two Shakespearean plays – *King Lear* and *The Tempest* – and what they reveal about the political themes of ambition and honor, love and friendship, rulers and usurpers.

Course Materials:

- *King Lear*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Penguin Classics, 2018)
- *The Tempest*, ed. Peter Holland (Penguin Classics, 2016)

Resources:

To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: **The Great Thinkers** (<http://thegreatthinkers.org/>) and **Contemporary Thinkers** (<http://contemporarythinkers.org/>) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

In particular, the page dedicated to [Shakespeare](#) may prove useful.

Monday, June 27, 2022

9:30 AM – 12:30 PM ET

Session I: *King Lear*

Readings:

- *King Lear*, Acts I and II

Discussion Questions:

1. What does the opening conversation between Kent and Gloucester tell us about the current political setting of the play? How does it hint at problems and themes that will come to dominate the play?
2. Does Lear's division of the kingdom serve the future good of England? Does the outcome of the first scene serve the future good of the country? Is Lear a good ruler?
3. Is Lear a good father? Might Lear's being a good father and being a good ruler be in conflict? Is Cordelia a good daughter?
4. Who serves Lear best in the first scene? Who loves him most? Consider Kent and the fool in your answer.
5. What does the play gain by Shakespeare's inclusion of a subplot (story of Gloucester and his sons)?

6. Does Shakespeare show any sympathy for the play's villain, Edmund? If so, how does he do so?

Tuesday, June 28, 2022

9:30 AM – 12:30 PM ET

Session II: *King Lear*

Readings:

- *King Lear*, Acts III and IV

Discussion Questions:

1. What does Edgar's disguise as a "poor Tom" from the London madhouse teach us about Edgar?
2. Why does Lear take such an interest in poor Tom, and even call him a philosopher? Is he correct when he calls Tom "the thing itself," "unaccommodated man"? (III.4.107).
3. What does Edgar learn while disguised as poor Tom?
4. Is Edgar justified in "trifling thus with his [father's] despair" (IV.6.134)? What is he trying to teach him?
5. To what extent are Lear's ravings when he meets with Gloucester "matter and impertinency mixed; / Reason in madness" (IV.6. 174–75)?

Wednesday, June 29, 2022

9:30 AM – 12:30 PM ET

Session III: *King Lear* | *The Tempest*

Readings:

- *King Lear*, Act V; *The Tempest*, Act I

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Edgar intrude on Albany's arrest of Edmund? Why does he challenge him to armed combat?
2. What has Lear learned from his sufferings? Was his tragedy necessary?
3. What do Edgar's last words at the end of the play mean? Will Edgar be a good king? Is it likely that his rule will differ from Lear's?
4. Why does Shakespeare make "nothing" and "all" reverberate throughout the play?
5. How does the short opening scene set the stage for *The Tempest*? How does it hint at problems and themes that emerge as the play unfolds?

Thursday, June 30, 2022

9:30 AM – 12 :30 PM ET

Session IV: *The Tempest*

Readings:

- *The Tempest*, Acts II, III, and IV

Discussion Questions:

1. Once the ship is wrecked and its occupants cast upon shore, there are several visions of a new political order, such as plans to usurp power. There is Gonzalo's utopian vision of the island as a commonwealth that he would administer "without sovereignty" (II.1.139–60). How does this play reflect on political foundings?
2. Is Ferdinand a good match for Miranda? Is Prospero a better matchmaker than Lear?
3. While Caliban describes Prospero as "a tyrant, / A sorcerer, that by his cunning hath / Cheated me of the island" (III.ii.41–43), Ferdinand says that he is "so rare a wond' red father and wise / Makes this place Paradise" (IV.I.123–24). Which is more correct? How would Shakespeare comment on their statements?
4. Why did Shakespeare include such strange beings as Caliban and Ariel in his play?

Friday, July 1, 2022

9:30 AM – 12:30 PM ET

Session V: *The Tempest*

Readings:

- *The Tempest*, Act V

Discussion Questions:

1. In the last scene of the play, several characters seek and grant forgiveness. Forgiveness also plays a large part in the resolution of *Lear*. What do we learn from these plays about forgiveness? Is there a place for forgiveness in ruling and in political life, more broadly?
2. Does Gonzalo's concluding observation about the outcome of the play ring true—that "all of us [have found] ourselves / When no man was his own"? (V.i.204–13). Does this apply to Prospero as well?
3. Prospero orchestrates the last scene of the play almost as if he were a stage director bringing his play to a fitting close. How does Shakespeare offer a mirror to his own dramatic art in Prospero? Are there ways in which he is like and unlike Prospero?
4. By the end of both *Lear* and the *Tempest*, a new political order has come into existence. Compare Prospero's rule to Lear's. Does King Lear offer sobering lessons for the future rulers in the *Tempest*?