

HISTORY VIA SHAKESPEARE

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Thursdays starting September 28 through November 16 for eight sessions | 1:30 – 3:30 p.m.
HYBRID AT NSK | LECTURE | 8 SESSIONS | UNLIMITED

Overview

Shakespeare wrote when Queen Elizabeth I, the unmarried, childless, Protestant daughter of Henry VIII, ruled Britain and then when King James I, the Protestant son of the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots, did. Religious conflict infected society. Proselytizing Catholics were executed. The Pope suggested that killing Elizabeth would be a service to God. There was a revolt against her. Shakespeare's alleged patron was convicted of treason. People feared the Queen's death might bring civil war. James often confronted Parliament. Riots occurred. The royals constantly strove to maintain order. Amidst all this, as Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt emphasizes, "Shakespeare's plays are centrally and repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder." In them, he often portrayed the tragic misrule of royal authority.

We shall examine plays that best exemplify his doing so. Richard II, for instance, depicts the overthrow of a monarch. Elizabeth viewed it as fostering rebellion. However, Shakespeare managed to avoid royal censorship by setting his plays in times past. Believing "What's past is prologue" (The Tempest), "Life is a walking shadow" (Macbeth), and authority can "Falsify men's hopes" (1 Henry IV), he hoped people would apply to their time key lessons from the history he revealed in his plays. He used his plays not so much to send secret messages but to portray universal truths.

In vivid characterization and captivating verse, Shakespeare also explored the emotional and psychological dimensions of the human person. Literary critic Harold Bloom credits him with "the invention of the human." And Professor Marc Conner stresses that his plays contain serious contemplations on philosophy, religion, history, and politics. We shall examine these aspects as well.

Class lectures will include key history and synopses of the plays we consider. So whether one is or is not familiar with Shakespeare, all can fully enjoy the course.