

Shakespeare and Presentism, Or What Does Shakespeare Have to Do with Abu Ghraib?

Dr. Thomas Anderson
EN 8543
English Lit 1485-1660
Tuesday 3:00-5:30

Students in this course will take Hamlet's assertion that "[t]ime is out of joint" as our critical starting point and read a selection of Shakespeare's plays while also interrogating the limits and possibilities of Presentism as a scholarly methodology. A generation of literary critics have understood the term 'presentist' as a criticism of scholarship that fails to take into account the specific contours of a play's historical moment. To the scholar trained to "[a]lways historicize," presentist approaches to Shakespeare fail to consider the historical differences between Shakespeare's early modernity and our own modern or postmodern moment. Over the last decade, however, literary critics have begun to reassess Presentist Shakespeare as a literary approach that demonstrates how the early modern playwright continues to press us to explore the most powerful themes that characterize and construct our own contemporary notions of power, sexuality, race, and politics.

In this course, we will try to "always anachronize" as we read Shakespeare with a critical eye toward the now. In what ways does Presentist Shakespeare influence our modern sense of subjectivity, identity and power? In what ways does it allow us to reconsider early modern notions of these concepts? What meanings emerge from Shakespeare's plays through a reading practice that makes explicit an awareness of our 21st century human, cultural, and political condition? In other words, what does Shakespeare have to do with Abu Ghraib?

Required Texts:

- Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Norton Shakespeare*. ISBN 0393970876.
(For students preparing for the MA Exam, we will read *Othello*)
- Grady and Hawkes, eds. *Presentist Shakespeare*. Routledge, 2007.

The class requires a short paper of 7-8 pages; an article length, scholarly essay of 18-20 pages; and a presentation on an individual play. Students will also write a book review.