

# SHAKESPEARE AND THE FANTASTIC

Dr. Jim Casey  
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## The Rosenbach

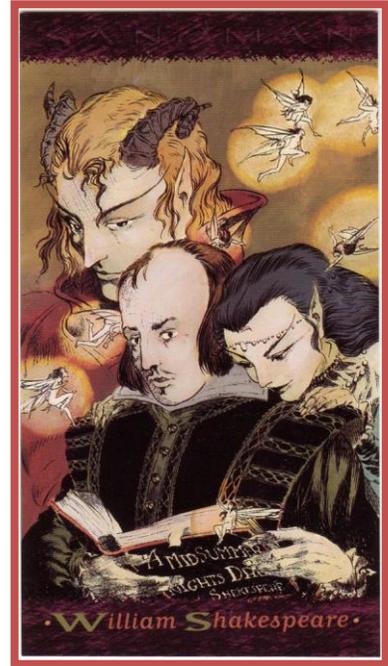
Thursday Evenings on Zoom

6:00 - 7:30pm EDT

December 15, 2022, January 5, 2023, January 19, 2023,  
February 2, 2023, February 16, 2023

## Course Description

Shakespeare's plays are full of fantastical elements and entities, including fairies, witches, ghosts, and magicians. But how should we read these otherworldly appearances in Shakespeare? How were such things viewed in the early modern period? How were they depicted on stage? And how might the answers to such questions change our understanding of the plays? We know that magic, science, and religion were less clearly delineated during Shakespeare's lifetime than they are today, but how might these blurred cultural beliefs affect our interpretation of individual playtexts? Using the Fantastic as a frame for reading the plays, this course will explore four of Shakespeare's better-known works—one comedy, two tragedies, and one romance. Our discussion of each play will proceed from the questions and interests of the participants, but we will begin with a focus on fairies and lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, witches and fate in *Macbeth*, ghosts and the afterlife in *Hamlet*, and magic and spirits in *The Tempest*. In addition to examining the Fantastic in Shakespeare, we will develop a basic understanding of the material conditions of the early modern stage and the poetic conventions of early English verse. Ideally, this course will be quite interactive, combining brief lecture materials with open conversations. Every time we meet, we will practice a variety of reading techniques that will enable participants to begin experiencing Shakespeare's plays more deeply and effectively on their own, recognizing each text not only as a narrative story but also as a poetic script that was meant to be performed.



## Course Texts

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine  
(ISBN 978-0-7434-7754-3)

*Macbeth*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (ISBN 978-0-7434-7710-9)

*Hamlet*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (ISBN 978-0-7434-7712-3)

*The Tempest*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (ISBN 978-0-7434-8283-7)

Depending on participant interest, we may have additional (optional) readings, but these four plays will be the only required readings for the course. If you can, please try to get the updated editions of the Folger Shakespeare Library mass market paperbacks (ISBNs listed above). These are inexpensive, well-edited, and widely available. You can use other editions if you like, but you may find yourself lost or confused because the editor has chosen variant words, moved or deleted key passages, reassigned lines to different characters, or imposed different act/scene divisions. Editions of *King Lear*, for instance, typically differ by about four hundred full lines and even more individual words. I would also suggest avoiding digital editions of the plays

(passages are hard to find in discussion and studies demonstrate that reading electronically is incompatible with the comprehension of complex texts), but again that is your choice.

### **Course Format**

We could spend hundreds of hours on each of these plays and still barely scratch their respective surfaces. Participants are encouraged therefore to let the Instructor know what topics and approaches they are most interested in pursuing. The course is structured around the Fantastic in Shakespeare but this focus is meant to be a frame and not a cage. Each Zoom session will begin with a brief PowerPoint lecture on early modern texts and contexts (primarily cultural and historical), but the majority of our time will be spent actively engaging with the plays themselves.

### **Course Schedule**

#### December 15, 2022 ~ **Introduction to Shakespeare and the Fantastic**

Shakespeare wrote professionally for the stage. In our first session, we will examine the material conditions of the early modern theatre and the techniques for staging the Fantastic during this time. Using short texts provided by the Instructor, we will also practice interpreting drama in verse and performing close reading analysis.

#### January 5, 2023 ~ **Fairies and Lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Fairies in early folk belief were not the tiny, adorable Tinkerbells that we think of today. Instead, they were complex, alien, and often frightening figures, blamed for innocent pranks and malicious ill-fortune. Reinterpreting the fey within this cultural context will allow us to reread the themes of love, sex, and procreation in the play.

#### January 19, 2023 ~ **Witches and Fate in *Macbeth***

According to tradition, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* to capitalize on King James' special fascination with witches and demonology. Whatever their provenance, the Weird Sisters and their prophecies are central to the narrative. In this session, we will consider how contemporary attitudes toward witches and witchcraft might alter our view of the play.

#### February 2, 2023 ~ **Ghosts and the Afterlife in *Hamlet***

Jacobean Catholics and Protestants had very different beliefs regarding the existence of ghosts, and the fate of Prince Hamlet depends on what kind of ghost he encounters. Beginning with the question of Old Hamlet, we will explore what the play appears to say about ghosts, suicide, purgatory, demons, and the afterlife.

#### February 16, 2023 ~ **Magic and Spirits in *The Tempest***

Medieval and early modern magic was variously interpreted as miraculous, demonic, astrological, scientific, organic, and unnatural. For our final session, we will discuss the changing and conflicting viewpoints on magic in the period, and how those sentiments intersect with issues of class, race, gender, genre, and religion in the play.

### **About the Instructor**

Dr. Jim Casey is a Fulbright Fellow, National Endowment for the Humanities grant recipient, Past President of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, editor of Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Two Noble Kinsmen*, and co-editor of the collection *Shakespeare/Not Shakespeare*. Before retiring from full-time teaching in 2020, he taught more than 100 graduate and undergraduate courses over more than twenty years. Although primarily a Shakespearean, he has published peer-reviewed essays on such diverse topics as fantasy, monstrosity, early modern poetry, medieval poetry, pedagogy, textual theory, performance theory, postmodern theory, adaptation theory, digital humanities, old age, comics, anime, masculinity, grief, the supernatural, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Ovid, *Firefly*, and *Battlestar Galactica*.