

## **READING *HAMLET***

Dr. Jim Casey

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### **The Rosenbach Museum and Library**

5 Week Virtual Course

### **Wednesday Evenings on Zoom**

**7:30 - 9:00pm EDT**

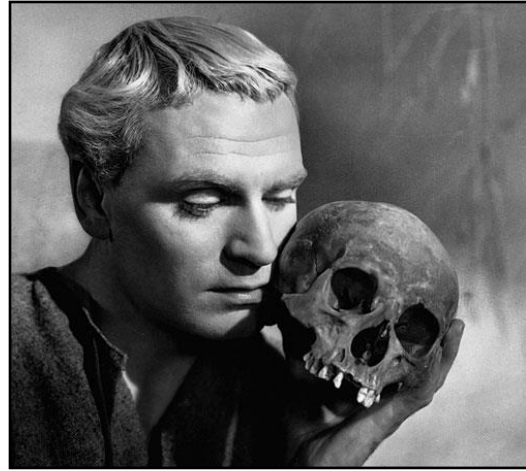
November 15, 2023, November 29, 2023,

December 13, 2023, January 3, 2024,

January 17, 2024

### **Course Text**

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



### **Course Description**

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of the most popular and influential plays in history. It is perhaps the most quoted, adapted, and parodied text in English. Even those who have neither seen nor read the play usually recognize "To be or not to be" or the image of Hamlet contemplating a skull. This course will explore the richness and beauty of Shakespeare's work, considering *Hamlet*'s language, action, characterization, philosophy, and more. Ideally, the course will be quite interactive, relying on vocal participation and free-flowing conversations that center on a particular theme or passage. Every time we meet, we will practice a variety of reading techniques that will enable participants to begin experiencing *Hamlet* (and eventually all of Shakespeare's plays) more deeply and effectively on their own, recognizing the playtext not only as a narrative story but also as a poetic script that was meant to be performed out loud.

### **Course Format**

We could spend hundreds of hours on *Hamlet* and still have more to discover. Thus, participants are encouraged to tell the instructor which topics and approaches they are most interested in pursuing. Each course meeting is structured around a topic and a set of close readings, but these focal points are meant to be frames through which we might view the play, not cages designed to confine us. Each Zoom session will begin with an opportunity for questions and clarifications, and then we will spend the majority of our time actively engaging with the playtext.

We will have additional (optional) readings for those who are interested, but we will concentrate on the play itself, so *Hamlet* will be the only required reading for the course. If you can, please try to get the updated print edition of the Folger Shakespeare Library mass market paperback (ISBN listed above). The Folger edition is 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, or imposed different act/scene divisions. Editions of *Hamlet* in particular can vary quite a bit because the play was originally published in three very different versions. I would also suggest avoiding digital editions of the play (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 Schedule

### November 15, 2023 ~ **The Play's the Thing**

Shakespeare wrote professionally for the stage and for an audience more attuned to “hearing” a play. In our first session, we will briefly discuss the material conditions of the early modern theatre and some techniques for reading Shakespearean language, using the famous “To be or not to be” and “too, too sullied flesh” speeches as starting points.

### November 29, 2023 ~ **It is an Honest Ghost**

Jacobean Catholics and Protestants had very different beliefs regarding ghosts, and the fate of Prince Hamlet depends very much on whether or not the spirit he encounters is, in fact, “honest.” Beginning with the question of Old Hamlet, we will examine the play’s conflicting perspectives on ghosts, suicide, revenge, purgatory, and the afterlife.

### December 13, 2023 ~ **He’s Mad, ’Tis True; ’Tis True ’Tis Pity / And Pity ’Tis ’Tis True**

Madness—both real and feigned—moves much of the plot of *Hamlet* and provides several important moments of pathos, character development, and humor. In this session, we will consider various instances of “lunacy” and how early modern beliefs regarding the causes and effects of madness might impact our understanding of the play.

### January 3, 2024 ~ **Frailty, thy Name is Woman!**

Gender roles and expectations in the period and the play are controlling and constraining for both men and women. In *Hamlet*, they drive Gertrude toward marriage, Ophelia toward madness, and Hamlet toward murder. In this session, we will look at several passages specifically concerned with biological sex and culturally constructed gender.

### January 17, 2024 ~ **As Your Business and Desire Shall Point You**

Our final session will be driven by the questions and interests of the group, either returning to earlier subjects in more depth or exploring issues we have yet to cover.

## 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 *The 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*. His current projects include *Shakespeare and Comics*, co-edited with Brandon Christopher (Arden Shakespeare, expected 2024) and *Fantasy Literature through History* (Bloomsbury, expected 2025).