

## HUMANITIES SEMINARS PROGRAM

*Shakespeare's History Plays:  
The Second Tetralogy*

**Spring 2025**

Wednesdays 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.  
Dorothy Rubel Room, The Poetry Center  
and On-line

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### **SEMINAR DESCRIPTION:**

Unlike comedy and tragedy, the history play was a recent form when Shakespeare turned to it. Depending on the play's source, the plot could follow either a tragic or comic pattern and could end either in resolution and triumph or in conflict and defeat. This seminar will approach the history play with an eye to the overall plot and inquire into the characterization of its principal figures. So doing will throw into relief perennial political topics: the transference of political power, the relationship between personal and public ethics, and the potential of society and its leaders to achieve progress within the state. The inquiry will reveal much about the era in which Shakespeare lived and illuminate much about the political history of our own. To borrow Hamlet's words, we shall find that the history plays do indeed "hold the mirror up to nature."

### **REQUIRED READING AND TEXTS:**

We shall read *Richard III*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part I*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *Henry V*.

*The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1997), is the standard complete works of Shakespeare and the one that I use. But any annotated edition—or individual editions of single plays—will do. The Signet Classics, The Pelican Shakespeare, the Penguin Classics are reliable, inexpensive, and readily available on Amazon, e-Bay, and other on-line outlets.

## **COURSE PROCEDURE:**

We shall read the plays together—that is, go through principal sections of the texts and discuss their significance. Since we shall focus on the texts and examine specific passages, lines, and even words, seminarians should bring the texts to class; otherwise, discussion will be difficult to follow. We shall supplement textual analysis with video clips of various productions of the plays under consideration.

We shall proceed on the assumption that seminarians have read (or reread) the plays before class. In most cases, reading each play should require three to four hours.

Do not hesitate to raise questions about particular or technical matters during discussion—for example, 'What is meant by *anaphora*' or 'What exactly was 'The King's Men'?' More general or open-ended questions—for example, 'Isn't Richard II just an irresponsible narcissist' or 'Isn't Hal unforgivably cruel in his rejection of Falstaff'—I should be happy to discuss and would especially welcome to have them written out before (or after) class.

## **COURSE CALENDAR:**

January 22: Introduction: Chronology of the reigns depicted in each play; the structure of the Elizabethan stage; the nature of the verse and prose of Shakespeare's dramatic language.

January 29: *Richard III* Acts 1-3

February 5: *R III* Acts 4-5

February 12: *Richard II* Acts 1-2

February 19: *R II* Acts 3-5

February 26: *1 Henry IV* Acts 1-2

March 5: *1 H IV* Acts 3-5

**-SPRING BREAK (March 5 – March 19)-**

March 19: 2 *Henry IV* Acts 1-2

March 26: 2 *H IV* Acts 3-5

April 2: *Henry V* Acts 1-2

April 9: *H V* Acts 3-4

April 16: *H V* Act 5; and conclusion.