

Law 622. Jurisprudence Readings Seminar (Spring 2026)

Politics and Human Nature in Shakespeare

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Alexis de Tocqueville famously argued that the bar is America's closest analog to an aristocracy, and that our republic could hardly hope to survive if the power of lawyers over its affairs did not increase in proportion to the power of the people. Today, members of our profession manifestly do exercise a disproportionate influence on the governance of the nation. The beneficent use of that influence requires that those with a command of technical legal skills be governed by the habits of mind associated with liberal education.

Abraham Lincoln probably came as close as anyone has ever come to exemplifying the aristocratic virtues and liberal habits of mind to which lawyers in a democracy should aspire. Shakespeare was one of Lincoln's principal teachers, which is a sufficient justification for all of us to become Shakespeare's students as well.

This semester, we will read fourteen plays, roughly in chronological order of their settings. Our goal will be to start learning how Shakespeare understood the interplay between human nature and the political cultures of various different regimes.

Each Wednesday, beginning on January 14, everyone will send me, via email and no later than 12:00 noon, a short paper about the reading for that week. These required papers may be as short as a page or two and will not be graded, though well-done papers will count positively toward the 33% class participation component

of the grade for the course. The principal purpose of the weekly papers is to help you get started in thinking about the reading for the next class. They can provide a short analysis of one of the themes in the play, or reflections on a puzzle or difficulty that you encountered in thinking about the work, or anything else that you find useful in preparing to participate in the class discussion.

The success of this class will depend on everyone's diligent preparation, and Shakespeare has provided incentives for such diligence. The more time one spends with these plays, the more pleasurable and rewarding they are to read. Rushing through Shakespeare, however, is painful and counterproductive, and reading a plot summary (or a translation into "modern English") is pointless. I strongly urge you to set aside enough time, well before class, to read each play carefully.

Shakespeare's enormous vocabulary includes a lot of words that are unfamiliar today. You should therefore use a text that is annotated with the definitions of such terms, such as the Arden, Folger, Norton, Oxford, or Signet editions. Find one that you like and be sure to bring the printed text with you to class.

The seminar paper will constitute 67% of the grade for the course. Your paper may take on almost any topic directly related to the assigned readings, but I encourage you to discuss your proposed topic with me before you get too far along with it.

You are strictly forbidden to use artificial intelligence tools for any aspect of this class.

Reading Assignments

January 15	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>
January 22	<i>King Lear</i>
January 29	<i>Coriolanus</i>
February 5	<i>Julius Caesar</i>
February 12	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>
February 19	<i>Hamlet</i>
February 26	<i>Macbeth</i>
March 5	<i>Richard II</i>
Spring Break	
March 19	<i>Henry IV Part 1; Henry IV Part 2</i>
March 26	<i>Henry V</i>
April 2	<i>Richard III</i>
April 9	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
April 16	<i>Othello</i>