

English E-130: Shakespeare and Modern Culture

Final Exam, grade: A

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Short answers (approx. 25 minutes)

Please reply in a brief paragraph (4-6 sentences) to the following questions. Rough memory is perfectly fine, but you should use as specific examples from the texts as you can.

1) ‘This fellow’s of exceeding honesty.’ So says Othello of Iago, whose perfidious duplicity turns out to be the downfall of a great many. Yet in what sense(s) *can* Iago be described as honest?

Iago is a smart character, able to analyze other people and manipulate them in order to use them for his goals. Although there is a reason for his jealousy, since someone else instead of him was being promoted by Othello, one gets the impression that Iago simply has to act the way he does without a proper reason and that his way of acting is his nature. In that sense, Iago is an honest character since he is true to himself, to his nature, and to his social position which actually enables him to act the way he does. Also, Iago’s “honesty” is mainly his reputation based on other people’s perspectives, and Iago basically manipulates people by making them think certain things by themselves, often but not always by telling them lies directly, but mostly by using what people already want to believe. Being mostly honest in his soliloquies, Iago is yet honest though often ambiguous in some dialogue scenes in which he tells Roderigo that he is a man of reason controlling his feelings and that his serving is only pretending, which eventually serves himself. Very early in the play, he says that he is not what he is, thus what he seems to be, which is actually self-reflective and honest.

2) Choose ONE episode from each king’s portrayed career, compare and contrast the styles of kingship evinced by Shakespeare’s Henry V and Richard III.

King Henry V is committed to the responsibilities a king has to fulfill always based on decisions that will serve his country best, also in a moral sense. Richard III is committed to himself and to his will to gain power. When King Henry agrees on hanging Bardolph because he had stolen a relic from a French church, he does so for moral reasons, emphasized by the fact that Bardolph once was his friend (*Henry IV*). When Richard III orders to have his supporter Buckingham killed, he does so because Buckingham had hesitated to agree to Richard’s plan to have young Edward and Richard, King Edward IV’s sons, killed. This execution of a former “friend” takes place because of whose moral concerns and behaviour, not because of criminal actions taking place in *Henry V*.

3) How do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth *differ* in how they are taken over by ‘vaulting ambition’ and led on to their treasonous deeds?

After the witches’ prophecies that Macbeth will become King of Scotland, he, still a man of honesty, honor, and loyalty, begins to consider the possibility of murdering King Duncan. But in contrary to Lady Macbeth, he fears his conscience and general consequences and decides not to kill him. Lady Macbeth yet has a huge strength of will, courage, and an unscrupulous attitude. Her self-interest makes the passive Macbeth a puppet on a string, torn between free will and heteronomy.

Everything changes after the murder: Macbeth does not take Lady Macbeth into his confidence anymore, he has learned to pretend and instead of him, Lady Macbeth is tortured by the deed, a deed she did not do by herself because the sleeping Duncan had resembled her father. Both characters are no longer divided between good and evil, “fair is foul, and foul is fair”, as the witches had prophesized.