

This course will consider the Latin sources that we now think Shakespeare was far more conversant with than used to be conceded. Chief amongst these sources in this particular course will be Lucretius and Ovid.

The notable Shakespearean Stanley Wells has written, “[t]he plays, not to put too fine a point on it, reek of sexuality.” This statement is hardly disputable. But Shakespeare’s Latinity will help us understand better why the position is unassailable — why, to borrow from *King Lear*, “... you smell a fault ... it smells of mortality.”

I should make clear immediately that the course does not require, explicitly or implicitly, a knowledge of Latin and that the course is not a throwback to venerable influence-studies. We will be studying Shakespeare as a reader, a highly literate man, not as an “erudite.” To be sure, there will be times when we need the *ipsissima verba*, and on those occasions we will find them through the Internet or through other means that I will make available. But primarily our work will be research on the topics of invention that Shakespeare encountered in the Latin writers who were most influential in his career. Thus, to give a quick but salient example, in the early narrative poem, “Venus and Adonis,” Shakespeare responds to Lucretius on various occasions primarily by way of Lucretius’s famous celebration of Venus that begins in book 1 and continues throughout the *De rerum natura*. Such Latin topicality enables investigations of Shakespeare’s texts which return often surprising results. If Shakespeare is not as “erudite” as his great contemporary Ben Jonson, it turns out that he is nonetheless a very literate poet. It is this literacy that we will be most interested in examining so as to appreciate Shakespeare’s contribution to English poetry.

Requirements for the course will be participation in the seminar as we discuss the details of Shakespeare’s rhetoric and literacy and two essays prepared outside of class in which students undertake an analysis of a particular example of Shakespeare’s rhetoric and literacy. These essays need not necessarily be lengthy nor, at least in the first instance, do they need to comport large (“bone-breaking”) bibliographies. First and foremost, they must engage with the way that Shakespeare transforms sources: he is the *most original* writer in our tradition who deliberately re-scripts *sources not his own, not original* with him—almost as if others’ inventions of topics liberated him to invent English poetry. This is the simple proposition of the course. We will test this proposition to learn how it may help us to understand the rhetoric with which Shakespeare composes poetry as he transforms English, language and culture.

R. Allen Shoaf

## CALENDAR

### August

1. 26 **Introduction** to the Course. Sources/Texts. Sequence of Readings. “Shakespeare and Literacy.”

### September

2. 2 **HOLIDAY** **Labor Day**
3. 9 The Problem of Lucretius and the Challenge of his Poem, *De rerum natura*
4. 16 The Influence of Lucretius: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
5. 23 The Influence of Lucretius: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*
6. 30 The Influence of Lucretius: Shakespeare, *Hamlet* **2**

## October

- 7. 7 The Influence of Lucretius: Shakespeare, *King Lear*
- 8. 14 The Influence of Lucretius: Shakespeare, *King Lear 2*
- 9. 21 The Influence of Lucretius: Shakespeare, *King Lear 3*
- 10. 28 The Influence of Lucretius: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

**PAPER #1 DUE**

## November

- 11. 4 The Influence of Lucretius: Shakespeare, *Macbeth 2*
- 12. 11 **HOLIDAY** Veterans Day
- 13. 18 Shakespeare the Lucretian, *Not Epicurean: Midsummer Night's Dream*
- 14. 25 Shakespeare the Lucretian, *Not Epicurean: Tempest*

## December

- 15. 2 Shakespeare the Lucretian, *Not Epicurean: Tempest 2*

**PAPER #2 DUE**

I will annotate and amplify the syllabus at length in the first meeting, but in conjunction with you, the students, so as to arrive at a plan that recognizes at least some parts of our diverse agendas.