

English E-130: Shakespeare and Modern Culture
Midterm 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) Using a specific scene or two to illustrate your points, comment upon the role of the fool in *King Lear*.

The fool's function in *King Lear* is that of a commentator, speaking out the truth. He does so from the beginning when he commentates on Lear's false estimation in terms of his daughters' love for him. Therefore, the fool's function is also that of a mirror to Lear as he repeatedly calls Lear a fool. He can also be seen as Lear's shadow until Lear himself starts to name himself a fool. The fool accompanies Lear until his insight into man's pure nature in the storm scene of Act III in which Lear starts to turn into a compassionate character. After that, he exits with the words "And I'll go to bed at noon"; he will not return for the rest of the play.

2) Discuss briefly some ways in which Beckett's *Endgame* inherits and interprets Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

In *Endgame*, the character of Hamm can be seen as an allusion to Lear; Hamm's wheelchair is his throne. Since he is permanently concerned with him being in the center of the room, it can be interpreted as an allusion to King Lear's blind (Hamm is literally blind like Gloucester who underscores Lear's spiritual blindness), egotistic and somehow absurd behaviour, his dominance and power. The key themes in both plays are blindness, insight into the very nature of man, and cruel meaningless existence. Beckett reduced the plot of *King Lear* as much as possible in order to dramatize the philosophy of existentialism. We also find here the nature of meaningless and therefore, grotesque – physical existence of man in an endless status quo (with no future) and nothing but.

3) *The Merchant of Venice* ruminates throughout upon themes of risk and adventure. Why?

The attributes of positively connotated risk and adventure (or "venture", which is actually mentioned in the text: It is inter alia Antonio's explanation of Jacob's success in the Biblical allusion told by Shylock) are consequently linked with the Christian characters of the play. It is the merchant Antonio who lives from risky sea voyages, and who is even ready to risk his life for his friend Bassanio. Bassanio himself is therefore linked with adventure, but he is also risky himself if we think of the choice of the three caskets which is indeed a risky endeavor. Being risky and adventurous seems to be a character trait of (Christian) merchants since it is strongly linked with their financial practices, "capitalism" in modern words. I think the themes of risk and venture refer to the New Testament which generally implicates risk, strongly connected with courage. After all, Jesus Christ as the New Testament's "role model" for courage is willing to risk everything for his faith.