

Year 3 Take Home Final Exam Essay Prompts

Choose two of the prompts below and write an essay responding to them. Each short essay should not exceed three double-spaced pages, with 12-point, Times New Roman font. Each essay will receive a score out of 50 points.

1. **Ian Smith.** Ian Smith's article, "Othello's Black Handkerchief," argues that the infamous handkerchief is black, not white. Drawing on this long-overlooked piece of information, Smith concludes his essay by asking "what reading whiteness in the handkerchief, despite evidence to the contrary, reveals about the habits and intellectual reflexes that inform our critical imagination. The essay asks whether this inveterate predisposition to see only a white handkerchief functions as an index to inherited critical frameworks that continue to circulate and shape the work of reading and producing knowledge in the field of early modern studies" (25). Using Smith's essay as a model, write an essay considering other "inherited critical frameworks" that inform how we read Shakespeare's plays. What assumptions (including race, but lots of other things too) do we reproduce in the encounter with Shakespeare? Your essay should use at least three plays to illustrate your argument.
2. **Failed rhetoric.** We have spent great effort this semester considering the question of rhetoric—of how Shakespeare's characters work to persuade others to think or do something. We have not, however, considered *failed* rhetoric. In at least three plays, find moments in which a character does not achieve his/her persuasive goals. Write an essay comparing and contrasting these instances of unsuccessful rhetoric, making an argument (i.e., an interpretive claim) that encompasses the significance of all the instances. What can moments of failed persuasion teach us about how Shakespeare's plays work?
3. **Gender.** Even in his own time, Shakespeare was known for his representation of women characters. But what gives his women characters such distinctiveness? Choose female characters from at least three plays and write an essay that answers the question, "What does it mean to be a woman character in Shakespeare?" Draw on W. J. T. Mitchell's model of representation—"a means of communication which is also a potential obstacle to it"—to articulate an argument that synthesizes your chosen woman characters.

In each case, be as specific as possible, remembering to draw on all that we have discussed and practiced this semester. If you want, you may refer to plays we have not read. Cite the plays in the standard way (act.scene.line), and cite Smith's article by page number. If you only cite Shakespeare and Smith, you don't need a Works Cited page. If you cite any other text or work, provide a Works Cited page formatted in MLA style.