

English 520: On Words  
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Polonius: "What do you read, my lord?"  
Hamlet: "Words, words, words."

Hamlet: "This is most brave,  
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,  
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,  
A scullion!"

Hamlet's response seems at once dismissive and exhausted. And his attitude to words is indeed famously vexed: if words might move him to tears, he also condemns himself for the response. Words are the province, so his argument problematically reasons, of the "whore," "drab," and "scullion." This course will, by contrast, take words seriously, investigating their etymologies and their histories in order to illuminate the texts they live in. Drawing on Raymond Williams's approach to "keywords," this class begins by investigating the recent flourishing of scholarship on words, following what Jeffrey Masten has called a "renewed historical philology." In his appeal to attend to words and their histories, he writes, "We have not sufficiently attended to *etymology*—the history of words (the history *in* words)." Then, energized by readings and manifestos by Williams, Masten, Roland Greene, William Empson, and others, we will to begin our primary investigations: studying keywords in early modern literature. We will concentrate each week on a play or poem(s) in tandem with a critical piece that illuminates our keyword. Beginning with *Richard III*, we will study the words "now," "determined," and (following Ramie Targoff's essay on the play), "amen." For *Othello*, keywords include "possession" and "delate" (following the work of Paul Yachnin on possession and Patricia Parker on delation/dilation). Our study of *The Merchant of Venice* will concentrate on the words "bond," "conversion," and "blood" (reading the work of Amanda Bailey on bonds, and Janet Adelman on blood). For *Twelfth Night* we will consider the word "baffle" (reading Adam Zucher on this term and phenomenon). For *The Tempest*, we will study "wonder," "slave," and "service" (next to work by Mary Nyquist on slavery and tyranny). In a week on Shakespeare's sonnets, I invite you to select our keywords. Indeed, as the course unfolds, I am open to your own reading interests, as we decide what keywords we study, in what texts. This course will also incorporate your voices in the form of your presentations on keywords of your selecting. Assignments will include a long critical paper; or two shorter papers; or, for some of you, a shorter paper and a creative piece that is built out of your investigations or engagements with keyword(s).

Readings will include selections from:

Anthony Grafton, *Worlds made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West* (2011)  
Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976; 2014)  
Roland Greene, *Five Words: Critical Semantics in the Age of Shakespeare and Cervantes* (2013)  
William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951; 1995)  
Jeffrey Masten, *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time* (2016)

Primary texts include:

*Richard III*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, and likely *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure*, and/or Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. But we might also include Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* or *Holy Sonnets*, Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, or even Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, we could range into more contemporary readings, especially if they resonate with our Shakespeare plays in some way. I am leaving a good portion of the syllabus open for our group to select and design together.