

Sabbatical Leave Proposal
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Seth Mendelowitz
English and Critical Studies

Responsibilities at Parkland

My normal teaching load of fifteen hours per semester typically includes English 099 (developmental English), Literature 125 (Introduction to Shakespeare), and tutoring in the Learning Lab.

I have served as Coordinator of Developmental Composition (for three years); Chair of General Education Academic Assessments (currently in my sixth year); President, Vice President, and Senator for the Parkland College Association; co-designer and teacher for our first Integrated Studies Community (a learning community for under-prepared students); co-writer of Parkland's Statement of Core Values; organizer of campus discussions and debates on diversity issues; member of faculty search committees in several different departments (including co-chairing an English search); and member of many other campus committees.

Eligibility for Sabbatical

I am in my tenth year at Parkland. I have not previously been granted a sabbatical leave.

Proposal Summary

I am requesting one full semester (either Fall 2004 or Spring 2005). I propose to write at least eight (ideally, twelve) essays on Shakespeare plays that are currently popular for teaching, as well as writing a draft of a synthesizing commentary that explains the overall approach around which my essays cohere.

This process of pulling together the essays would include drawing from the copious notes I have amassed during my sixteen semesters of teaching and passionately studying Shakespeare; reviewing a wide range of resources that I already have at my disposal; spending time at the University of Illinois library (including the Rare Books Room) reading, as needed, its comprehensive collection of works that served as Shakespeare's primary sources; visiting the Chicago Shakespeare Theater (with which I am familiar, as I have brought over two hundred Parkland students there); attending other Shakespeare performances; and seeking feedback on my emerging essays from professors with whom I have studied.

Signature of Department Chair

Date

Signature of Applicant

Date

Rationale and Justification

I would love the opportunity to focus for one semester on elements of my profession that I otherwise cannot find time for due to the wide range of professional responsibilities that require more immediate attention. This sabbatical would draw upon the three areas in which I have received Master's degrees. As a teacher of Shakespeare, with my most recent Master's in literature, I have been passionate in my study of Shakespeare's works; having my previous (my second) Master's degree in the teaching of English composition (the two operative words being *teaching* and *composition*), I would like to be able to transmit to students and fellow teachers a particular way of accessing the richness of Shakespeare's imagistic writing—in other words, I wish to find clear, accessible articulation of the complexities of his works; and having received my first Master's in creative writing, I wish to focus on approaches to Shakespeare that receive little attention in most literature programs and journals today—namely, Shakespeare's stylistic predilections.

The approach to Shakespeare around which my essays would cohere involves a careful examination of the webs of images and characterizations that constitute each of his plays. Shakespeare's "associative style" was such that as he wrote his texts, each moment of dialogue seems to have been conjured from other dialogue within the work, so that each word, line, character, event seems to have a hyperlink connection to endless other words, lines, characters, and events in the same play. In addition to investing each of his works with a sweeping unity and cumulative power, this stylistic predilection is what fills his works with such rich ironies and complex social commentaries and psychological portrayals. While there are many scholars who have written about Shakespeare's rhetorical style and imagery (whom I would tap into as I write my own essays), I have not found collections of essays geared for teachers and students that focus on this aspect of Shakespeare, the aspect that has excited me most about his works. While I don't pretend to be a scholar or an expert in current literary criticism, I would like to think that I at least have derived some interesting insights into his plays and some straightforward ways for appreciating one aspect of the design of Shakespeare's plays. This approach includes demonstrating how seemingly marginal scenes and characters echo key images and themes in such a way as to heighten and complicate the effect and meaning of each play as a whole.

I have attached to this proposal excerpts of commentaries that I have written (on *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus*). While they do not precisely reflect my plans for the essays that I would write during a sabbatical, they do show in rudimentary form what fascinates me about Shakespeare's plays. Each essay that I propose to write during the sabbatical will explore a different play, discussing the recurrent images, themes, and patterns that constitute the given play; demonstrating how these reverberating images, themes, patterns are found, with richly suggestive implications, in even the seemingly marginal scenes and character portrayals; and explaining how these reverberations provide a clue for understanding the play and appreciating the play's rich and often ironic commentaries on its main characters and on humanity in general.

This one-semester sabbatical would provide an intellectually challenging way of reinvigorating my excitement about writing, literature, and the transmission of excitement about writing and literature to students.

Specific Goals for this Proposed One-Semester Sabbatical

- Write essays on at least eight (ideally twelve) of Shakespeare's plays (*Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*, and hopefully *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*). I would also write a draft of an introductory commentary explaining the overall approach to Shakespeare that my essays take.
- Regularly visit the University of Illinois library (which possesses copies of all of Shakespeare's known primary sources), including the Rare Books Room, to read relevant passages in Shakespeare's sources (e.g., Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*, Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, North's *Plutarch's Lives*, etc...).
- Visit Shakespeare theaters, such as the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, with whom I have established good relations due to having brought many groups of students to performances over the past eight years. Often the Playbills of past performances (and archives of films of the performances) can offer valuable insights into the plays, coming as they do from a performance/artistic (rather than scholarly) perspective.
- Attend premiere performances of Shakespeare plays (in Stratford, Ontario; Ashland, Oregon; New York City; or England). I would travel to the location whose theater offerings, for the particular semester of the sabbatical, coincide most with the plays that I am focusing my essays on.
- Contact professors with whom I have studied and developed a good rapport (at the University of Illinois, for instance), for feedback on my essays.

**Note that I have attached excerpts of commentaries that I have written, to give a rough sense of the aspect of Shakespeare that has most impassioned me.*

SABBATICAL REPORT
for Parkland Library
Seth Mendelowitz, Spring 2005

My sabbatical gave me time to read in depth some of the sources, available at the University of Illinois, that Shakespeare used to develop his plays. I primarily focused on the sources for Shakespeare's English history plays, such as Raphael Holinshed's multi-volume *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. I wrote approximately one hundred fifty polished pages of essays (again, focusing on the English history plays), as well as many first-draft pages of essays (primarily on some of the comedies).

This opportunity to focus so intensively on Shakespeare helped me better to articulate the Shakespearean stylistic predilection that I try to help students to appreciate. By way of his "associative style"—his creation of a web of echoing words, images, themes, and events within a given play—Shakespeare multiplied meanings. By looking carefully at the repetitions and permutations of various elements within a play, we find layers of political commentary, psychological complexity and depth, and irony that are not immediately apparent on the surface.

I have attached a short sample of the writing that I completed during the sabbatical—a sample from my analysis of *Henry V* that gives a quick glimpse of one of my basic, over-riding points: that the plays, upon close examination, reveal layers that often challenge ironically or add "perspectivism" (a broader array of perspectives) to the characterizations that are most immediately apparent.

Tangentially, the sabbatical also gave me time to get plans going for an on-line Shakespeare course, which is now (as of Spring 2006) being offered. There is a demand for this offering, as the available course seats filled rapidly, and the sabbatical time certainly helped me to design what I hope is a good quality, clear introduction to Shakespeare.

Excerpt of an essay on *Henry V*, a play about a king regarded, in Shakespeare's England, as a legendary leader and great Christian. Commentators have long been uncomfortable with what they took to be a dramatic tribute to a king whose warmongering and sometimes cold stage presence seemed to undercut the tribute,
written by Seth Mendelowitz during his sabbatical, Spring 2005.

Addressing citizens of Harfleur at the beginning of Act III, scene iii, Henry proclaims "I am a soldier,/ A name that in my thoughts becomes me best," and then three lines later he delivers a gruesome description of what the English "soldier" will do if Harfleur resists his demand (promising, as he did above with the French prisoners, to shut off that premier Christian blessing of mercy):

The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
And the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart,
In liberty of bloody hand shall range
With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass
Your fresh fair virgins and your flow'ring infants...

(III.iii.10-14)

Henry repeats "soldier(s)" three times in the next thirty lines, as he continues to describe the rapes they will commit, the "naked infants spitted upon pikes" (l.38), and so on. As his speech had begun with the declaration that "soldier" is the name that best becomes him, the dark ironies in Shakespeare's depiction of this great English hero are obvious. It perplexes me that critics for so long had considered the play a failure due to Henry's character, it never having occurred to them that the play's tribute to Henry might have been ironically drawn. George Bernard Shaw complained that "One can hardly forgive Shakespeare quite for the worldly phase in which he tried to thrust such a Jingo hero as his Harry V down our throats"; Elmer Stoll, who says we can be certain beyond a peradventure of a doubt that Shakespeare's own voice sings Henry's praises, nonetheless averred that "The patriotism, though ardent, is not highly enlightened. The war is for no good cause; Henry's claim to the throne is, for all that he believes in it, unfounded"; William Hazlitt thought that "Shakespear labors hard to apologize for the actions of the king." It is striking that for so long readers of the play neglected to defer somewhat more to the often brilliant poetry of the play in order to hear it more fully and to recognize, thereby, that Henry V was, in Shakespeare's very conception, that "very amiable

monster” that Hazlitt excoriated him for being. But, I suppose, we might take the long tradition of misreading and underestimating the play as somewhat of a tribute to Shakespeare’s skill in offering a “proper” play of one type, an encomium to an English hero, which we read according to how the Chorus instructs us, glossing over (or criticizing Shakespeare for) the details that might disturb the surface image. It is as though *dramatically* the play hails the great leadership of the King, while *literarily* it contains another grand layer, one that subverts the drama the audiences had long thought they were to be viewing. Perhaps the study of Shakespeare as literature, the rise of close textual analysis, and the increasing recognition that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were concerned with their literary legacies, in addition to their stage success, have enabled us to appreciate the play more fully than the long line of detractors had. Once one begins peering through and discerning the ironic subtext, the surface tale of piety and glory seems increasingly diaphanous. The facade of holy gentility—such as in the King’s testimony that “when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner” (III.vi.115-19)—attenuates when set against the text’s backdrop of a king’s merciless determination.