

## **ENGL 4303: Introduction to Shakespeare**

### **Assignment 3: Adapting a Tragedy**

Due by Monday, Dec 16, 12:15pm, through Blackboard

20% of Grade

approx. 1500 words

### **Purpose**

#### **Knowledge**

After doing this assignment you will understand:

1. The amount of interpretation and adaptation required to turn a script into a performance.
2. How creative processes can both rely on and reject aspects of pre-existing material.

#### **Skills**

After doing this assignment you will be able to:

1. Adapt portions of a pre-modern text for a specific contemporary audience.
2. Craft an interpretive argument that supports a specific performance choice.

### **Task**

Here is a recommended sequence of steps:

1. Pick one of the three Shakespearean tragedies that we read to be the focus of your paper.
2. Choose and describe a specific audience, venue, or medium for your production. Film or stage? Particular theater?
3. Do at least 3 of the following:
  - Select one speech from the play and plan an argument for how you would coach the actor or actress to deliver it. What would be on the character's mind? What would the character's tone be? How would the character feel toward other characters who are present?
  - Identify something that is missing or ambiguous in the play and explain how you would clarify what is absent. For example, what is Gertrude's demeanor in a long scene in which she has no lines or stage directions?
  - Select a physical object from the play—e.g., Desdemona's handkerchief—and make an argument for the physical characteristics of the prop you would use.
  - Consider an alternative cultural context for the play. How would you adapt some of the play's themes and values to fit this alternative context? Be specific for what material you might include, change, or leave out.
  - Re-write a speech or dialogue in contemporary language, or using an alternative poetic form.
4. Draft an introductory paragraph that initiates your proposal, identifies a specific venue or audience, and explains how your more specific proposals are connected.
5. Draft your body paragraphs, with about one paragraph per specific proposal. If you've re-written a speech or dialogue, you can include that in the body of your paper.
6. Draft a concluding paragraph that justifies your choices based on a theme or perspective they share and on the impact you expect them to have for your chosen audience.

7. Run grammar-check and spell-check to catch basic errors.
8. Print out your paper and read it aloud. This is the most proven technique for catching errors and improving clarity and style.
9. *Optional*: Contact the Writing Center (CLASS+) for assistance with structure, style, and mechanics.
10. Submit the paper through Blackboard, and have a great holiday!

Here are a few steps I suggest you avoid:

- Describing an alternative cultural or historical context for the play without linking that context to very specific choices and changes you might make.
- Incorporating too many major themes, speeches, or characters.
- Watching numerous adaptations to search for ideas.

### Criteria

I will assess whether your paper meets, exceeds, or does not meet the following criteria, using a template like this:

Needs Improvement	Criteria	Above and Beyond
	<i>Specificity</i> : Identifies and clearly describes a particular audience and context for the play. Also makes very specific proposals for how precise lines would be delivered or re-written, how an alternative context or source would impact particular passages or scenes, or how props and stage directions would appear.	
	<i>Creativity</i> : Proposes novel and daring choices that demonstrate insight into the material.	
	<i>Argumentation</i> : Provides persuasive justifications for each performance choice and integrates these choices into larger aims for a production of the given play.	
	<i>Style</i> : Prose style is clear, smooth, and engaging.	
	<i>Mechanics</i> : No grammatical errors or typos.	

#### Bonus / Deductions

- Late hard copies will lose 5 points after 12:15pm on the due date, and for every 24 hours after that.
- You can receive 2 bonus points if I receive an electronic notification that you have visited the Quality Writing Center (CLASS+)

#### Sample Paper Outline

Paragraph One: I propose a new play that echoes familiar themes and scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*. However, I draw the content of the love story itself from a radio documentary about a relationship between two young men, one Israeli and one Palestinian. (Cite and briefly summarize this source.)

Paragraph Two: When Romeo and Juliet meet, their lines take the form of an Elizabethan sonnet—the quintessential English poetic form. When “David” and “Ibrahim” meet—through an online dating app—I would stage the scene with the two men on their cell phones describing each other’s dating profiles. Their lines would take the form of a Ghazal, an ancient and pre-Islamic form of Arabic poetry, formed by strict rules of rhyme and rhythm, comprising at least five couplets. This form was often used to describe love between men or the pain of separation between lovers. (Include some sample couplets.)

Paragraph Three: I would revise Friar Laurence’s “Art thou a man?” speech (3.3.109-158) to Romeo somewhat, but the main difference in its effect would be in the context—delivered not to a man who is weeping and overly passionate about the impact of Tybalt’s death on Juliet, but to a man pursuing a same-sex relationship in a culturally hostile context. (Include where you would locate this speech in the plot.)

Paragraph Four: Lastly, a major difference between my adaptation and the *Romeo and Juliet* is the ending. I believe that my audience—conditioned both by the play *Romeo and Juliet* and by contemporary portrayals of terrorism—would expect suicide to play a dramatic role in the play’s final scene. My play would end with a speech not by the Prince of Verona and reconciliation between hostile factions, but with a very simple argument about something mundane, like forgetting to buy milk at the grocery store yesterday. A closing soliloquy, similar to the one in the radio story, would explain that there was a lot more going on than this little incident, but that it is very difficult to tell why relationships end. (Sample adaptation of radio speech.)

Conclusion: I shared with Shakespeare and with many other adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* a primary interest in the effects of hostile political consequences on romantic relationships. However, I chose a same-sex relationship rather than idealizing a heterosexual relationship. My production therefore shows an additional layer of hostility with which some relationships must contend. All of my performance choices show that my notion of “originality” and “creativity” is similar to that of Shakespeare, in that I chose not to invent original plotlines or characters, and I also conformed dialogue in some cases to the requirements of specific poetic forms (e.g. sonnet or Ghazal). Nevertheless, I also wanted to meet audience demands for the surprising and

unexpected, and so I chose a very different type of love story with a somewhat mundane ending—which is its own type of modern tragedy.