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21L.016 / 21M.616 Learning from the Past: Drama, Science, Performance
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Guidelines for Comparative Short Essay Assignment

Before you write:

-Read and think about the text of your assigned plays, considering the scenes, issues, and speeches of most interest to you. Consider, too, the arc of the plays: how each scene contributes to the whole to convey meaning and theme.

N.B.: A good approach to this is simply to write down, in sequence, what happens in each scene. By re-reading this, you will find that it is often remarkably easy to trace the playwright's emphasis.

-Find an intriguing parallel between your two plays, a *specific* point of comparison. You might, for example, focus on:

- a scenic parallel, similar treatment of an event or encounter (a wooing scene, an interrogation, a death scene)
- a dramaturgical device (overhearing; disguise; the use of soliloquy)
 - a clearly defined issue (one dimension of sexuality; one aspect of the representation of religion; a daughter's rebellion)
- a shared pattern of language (imagery, figures of speech, verse forms)
- two similar characters, linked by their social position, situation, or attitude

Analyze carefully one of your chosen scenes, or the patterns raised by comparison of several passages from different scenes. Look up any words or references with which you are not familiar, and make any concrete connections with the contextual readings that you can.

N.B.: Take note of recurrent imagery or words in the text.

-Using the historical, philosophical, and theatrical materials that we have studied thus far, consider how they might help illuminate the scenes or issues that you have noticed. Consider what questions the scenes raise that might be further illuminated by your careful, comparative analysis.

Now you are ready to generate your precise thesis statement. Based on your analysis, develop a hypothesis about the most illuminating or compelling relationship between the two scenes/patterns, as they epitomize the larger relationship between the two plays. This requires that you understand the function or significance of the scene/pattern/topic you have chosen within each play, as it pertains to the play as a whole; *if possible*, also consider how it illustrates or illuminates the real-life drama of its historical moment.

Now you are ready to write.

Make sure you have formulated a clear, thoughtful *thesis statement*.

In a five-page essay, discuss your selected scenes/speeches in a way that supports your thesis, using specific textual evidence to substantiate your claims. Be clear in your analysis to show how particular choices work to shape interpretation of the play. Make sure your topic is both narrow enough to be thoroughly investigated in the allotted space, yet also rich enough in its significance to leave the reader both interested and satisfied that something of importance has been revealed. Adequate narrowness will be the challenge: only by narrowing your gaze do the specific come into sharp focus.

After you write:

Print out the essay and read it aloud.

Edit your writing to make sure that the sentences are lucid, the connections between thoughts felicitous, and the paragraphs useful as indicators of the stages in your argument. An elegant turn of phrase would not be amiss. Revise the essay, as needed. Proofread for sound and sense.

Print out the essay again, double-spaced, using 12 pt. Times New Roman font and standard margins.

Paper due on March 19th. Come to class whether or not you have your essay completed and printed.