

## Sophister Option Description Template 2025-2026

**Option Name:** The History Play: Shakespeare and after

**Option Short Title:** History Play

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**ECTS Weighting:** 10

**Semester Taught:** Hilary Term

**Module Content:**

William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan*, Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*, Brian Friel, *Translations*, Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls*, Tom Stoppard, *Leopoldstadt*

**Learning Outcomes:**

On successful completion of this module students will be able to:

- Show knowledge of a range of history plays by Shakespeare and modern playwrights
- Analyse the factors defining the form of the history play
- Assess the relationship between the history dramatized in the plays and the audiences that watched them
- Identify the political ideology underpinning the plays
- Apply the skills developed in this module to the reading of other plays

**Learning Aims:**

What defines a history play as a separate form? How much does it depend on an audience's awareness of the history it represents? And in what ways do the politics of the playwrights' present time influence their representation of the past? These are the sort of questions that will be explored in this module.

Shakespeare has sometimes been said to have invented the form of the history play. Even if that is not literally true, he created models that have been hugely influential on future writers. In the chronicles of English history he found materials that could deliver theatrical series, keeping an audience coming back for more. Three of his plays in this form, *Richard II*, and the two parts of *Henry IV*, will be studied to see how they relate to one another, whether they stand as independent plays, and what sort of politics inform them. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a sequel to the earlier *Julius Caesar* in terms of the history represented, but a radically different sort of play with its focus on issues of gender as much as politics. We will

consider what sort of dramatic opportunities the Roman world afforded Shakespeare, distant as it was in time and culture from English history and the audiences who watched the English history plays.

In the modern period, the history play has been put to quite new purposes, and the second half of the module will be concerned with the re-making of the form in the twentieth century and beyond. So, for example, Shaw in *Saint Joan* set out not just to dramatize the story of Jeanne d'Arc (recently canonized at the time of writing the play) but to show the underlying historical significance of her life. Through Act I of *The Crucible* Miller interpolates passages of commentary pointing up the relationship between the seventeenth-century Salem witch trials and the contemporary persecutions of the anti-Communist McCarthy period. Friel went back to the period of the 1830s for *Translations* to provide a historical perspective on the Northern Irish Troubles which were at their worst when the play was staged. History plays, from Shakespeare's time on, have been largely dominated by the men thought to have shaped history. Churchill in *Top Girls* challenged this view with its assembly of iconic women through the ages, while dramatizing the cost to those women within the patriarchal system. Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt* represents the lives of European Jews across several generations of the one family, showing the impact of the terrible tragedy of the Holocaust.

Apart from background introductions to each text, the module will be taught entirely through seminar discussion on the basis of themes and suggested reading posted in advance on Blackboard.

**Assessment:**

2 essays

Short essay of 1500 words, longer essay of 4500 words

35%/65%

**Preliminary reading:**

While there is a huge critical literature on Shakespeare, surprisingly little has been written on the history plays as a form. These texts will provide you with a background for the module.

Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Herbert Lindenberger, *History at Play* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975)

Matthew H. Wikander, *The Play of Truth and State* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).