

## SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY and SOCIAL JUSTICE

Class (online): MWF 11:20-12:10; Office hours (virtual): Mondays 2:45-5:15

**Professor Wendy Beth Hyman (she/her)**

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Improvisation, transgression, eroticism, gender-bending, shape-shifting, song, play: many of Shakespeare's comedies generate subversive energy and can be an enormous amount of fun to read and to see. But this genre of plays, contrary to popular opinion, also dramatizes troubling themes as well: cruelty, isolation, scapegoating, misogyny, sexual assault, racism, antisemitism, transphobia, xenophobia, and more. Some of Shakespeare's darkest comedies (*Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well that Ends Well*) are so discordant they have long been classified by literary critics as "Problem Comedies." And yet to some extent comedy is *always* a "problem": always at someone's expense, always reinforcing the status quo.

This Shakespearean Comedy course explores two propositions: first, that Shakespeare as a playwright recognized the genre as problematic, shining a spotlight on its tendency to provide superficial and exclusionary solutions to social problems. The second proposition is that these plays can help us engage in meaningful ways with *our* own historical moment and social problems. In this class we grapple with the past not only for its own sake, but also to think about how to recreate the world we live in now. We therefore begin with the accusation that Shakespeare himself is a problem, symbolic of an outmoded canon, of white supremacy, or of retrograde cultural values. How can we intervene to create many, diverse Shakespeares? Likewise: products of their time, Shakespearean comedy nonetheless thwarted convention and emphasized injustice. So how can we locate its blind spots—as well as our own? My goal: to study the structures and ambitions of early modern literature as a means to animate our own intellectual and ethical pursuits. My conviction: literature's inventions are tantamount to, and even models for, acts of world-making. My promise: our virtual classroom will value creativity, intellectual engagement, diverse voices, and action.

## Texts

Shakespeare	<i>Comedies</i>	W. W. Norton	978-0393938616
Shakespeare	<i>Othello</i>	Arden	978-1472571762
Keith Hamilton Cobb	<i>American Moor</i>	Methuen	978-1350165304
Toni Morrison	<i>Desdemona</i>	Oberon Modern	978-1849433891
Eklund & Hyman	<a href="#"><u>Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare</u></a>	Edinburgh ( <i>free</i> , open access: add to cart and purchase for \$0)	978-1474455602

\*In a pinch, access [digital copies](#) of Shakespeare's works through the Folger Shakespeare Library

**OBJECTIVES:** by the end of the semester, students will:

- Acquire increased analytical and interpretive skills for reading Shakespeare plays/viewing productions
- Recognize the components of comedy as a genre, and understand their social and cultural implications
- See historical literature as part of an ongoing conversation with current social issues
- Gain confidence in discussing literature's value as a creative endeavor and academic field
- Use research and literary analysis to develop problem-solving skills
- Make active connections between analytical and creative approaches to knowledge generation
- Engage the intellectual as well as ethical benefits of doing social justice work
- Hone skills of explication, argumentation, and analysis *and* simultaneously gain comfort in listening, revising viewpoints, and changing your mind
- Gain greater ability to analyze difficult and dense literary texts regardless of origin
- Actualize a community of care and learning in the midst of real-world trauma

### **A COUPLE OF THOUGHTS ABOUT SHARING SPACE AS LEARNERS NOW:**

**No gaslighting zone:** I am poignantly aware that we are in the midst of a pandemic, a national uprising, a fraught election, environmental crises, and yet more. We are all living through fear, uncertainty, and trauma. I will be generous about deadlines, accommodations, and anything else you need; just be in touch. My goal is simply for us to just keep learning together, whatever version of our world we find ourselves in. Please be aware that your professor is living through the same conditions you are, and is teaching three full classes online for the first time in her career, so we need to all be patient with each other. Things will be messy. That said, great learning can still happen even when (sometimes *especially* when) there is mess.

**Diversity:** This classroom will operate with respect for all its members, and will strive to create an environment where our differences are a rich asset. We are collectively responsible for creating the kind of space we want to learn in, so please bring your best self to the proverbial table. That said: there needs to be space made to get things wrong. That's called learning! So give each other the benefit of the doubt. Students with disabilities should contact me as early as possible so that we can discuss proper accommodations, and

if financial hardship is interfering with learning, please let me know and I will try to help you to secure resources. Anyone who has other concerns about the (virtual) classroom should set up an [office hour](#).

**Course content:** “*Omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt.*” The great early modern Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s words can be translated this way: “all things supremely splendid are as difficult as they are rare.” Although hopefully we all experience moments of delight that are *not* difficult, I take his words to mean that many of the most precious things we experience in life—and some of the most beneficial knowledges we arrive at—might emerge out of pain, difficulty, or discomfort. Some of the material we will encounter this semester is about—and has even produced—suffering, and some may be very difficult to read and see. Racism, sexual coercion, misogyny, ableism, and other forms of exclusion and cruelty are a regular feature of these texts, so before committing to this class, please decide if this is material you are prepared to wrangle with. I cannot always anticipate every reader’s reactions (you may not even anticipate your own!), and I want you to take excellent care of yourself in all circumstances. Still, it is my conviction that responding on an aesthetic, intellectual, and personal level to difficult texts increases our internal resources, and deepens our capacity for knowledge, growth, righteous action, and even delight.

Lastly, I am not an expert on every topic covered in this syllabus, and like every human, have my own limitations. That’s a condition of any prescribed subject position, and it’s also the consequence of being a lifelong learner deliberately stretching in new ways. I have tried to attend to this by inviting other experts in, and also by incorporating diverse voices in the syllabus itself. I look forward to learning from you, too.

#### FORMAT:

Synchronous Zoom meetings: Accessible at [this](#) link. Meeting ID: 932 7057 3716; passcode: 361004

**Mondays:** Generally speaking, I will either post a recorded lecture for you to watch *or* we will have a visiting professor who we will interact with us synchronously as a large group during class time. We will have five such visitors, who all work on Shakespeare and social justice everywhere from El Paso to Hawai’i to Cape Town. It is an incredible privilege to have these renowned scholars joining us! There will be a couple of small variations to the schedule but mostly this will be the plan for Mondays.

**Wednesdays/Fridays:** In order to make conversation manageable, I will split the class into two discussion sections, with half the class meeting Wednesday and half on Fridays. Your focus on your non-class day should be on secondary reading, current event reflections, group performance, and student choice project. You are invited but not required to watch the other group’s sessions.

#### Asynchronous (Slack)

We will rely on our [slack channel](#) for almost everything else. *Enable the alerts and make it a habit to check in daily.* On the **#general** channel, I will provide important updates and announcements. On **#lectures** I will post links to all new lectures. Recorded zoom sessions will be on **#zoom**. This is all a dark and inscrutable code, I know. **#random** is for memes, humorous links, and nerdery. Under the channel for each play (e.g. **#merchantofvenice**), we will have ongoing asynchronous discussions. All students will be expected to participate in conversation on slack several times a week, and this will be the primary mode of engagement for any students unable to attend the synchronous Zoom discussions due to time zone or connectivity issues (doubled asynchronous work will be expected). You will need to post at least twice weekly, **a minimum of 150 words each**, as follows:

- By Tuesday at 8PM, respond to something in reading/lecture; pose discussion question for class

- By Friday at 8PM, respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class

#### Virtual Engagement Expectations:

- Stay focused. Please stay engaged in class activities. Close any apps on your device that are not relevant and turn off notifications. Being present has never been more important.
- Turn on your video when possible. It is so helpful to be able to see each other, just as in class!
- Mute your microphone when you are not talking to help eliminate background noise.
- Find a quiet, distraction-free spot to log in if possible. Turn off any music, videos, etc. in the background, or use headphones with a microphone if necessary.
- Use the chat window for questions and comments that are relevant to class; I'll ask one student each class to keep an eye on the chat and alert me to anything I've missed.

#### Attendance Policy:

- Regular and on-time attendance at our daily Zoom sessions is expected, analogous to in-person class attendance. The content of the course relies upon each student's interaction with me, our guest speakers, and each other. *However*, if you have time zone issues, connectivity issues, or for some other reason find making these sessions impossible, please let me know and we will discuss an accommodation (usually by way of doubled asynchronous participation).
- Please let me know as soon as possible if you must miss class due to illness, religious holiday, or another issue. All Zoom sessions will be recorded, and you are responsible for missed material.
- If you miss more than four days, we will need to set up a virtual [office hour](#) to assess whether or not you will be able to successfully complete the course.



#### Evaluation/Requirements

Ongoing Zoom participation (attendance, active listening and regular verbal participation)	10%
Ongoing Slack participation: minimum 2 weekly posts of 150 words each (see above)	10%
<b>Sept 27:</b> First Shakespeare and social justice relevance reflection: three times this semester, identify one recent event or news item and provide a semiformal reflection on how any of the reading for the class illuminates, exemplifies, responds to, or anticipates our current moment. These should be posted on our <b>#currentevents</b> channel on slack, and be about 400-500 words. The first is due on September 27; the other two are on your own schedule ( <b>all due by Dec 7</b> )	15%
<b>Oct 16:</b> Virtual scene performance and group analysis	15%
<b>Nov 6:</b> Essay due (1500-2000 words; prompts to follow)	20%
<b>Dec 7:</b> at 4PM by email: Student choice project (see below)	20%
<b>Dec 13:</b> at 4PM by email: Final reflection/self-analysis (see below)	10%



Student choice: This portion of your grade (20%) is up to you, although it should be cleared with me so we can strategize about details and I can point you to resources. Some ideas include:

- Those interested in pedagogy might design a lesson plan for how you would introduce any of these plays to a group of junior or high school students, with class activities and assignments.
- Creative writers might experiment with writing a scene placing a character from one Shakespearean tragedy into the world of another—or better yet, into *our* world. What ensues?
- Likewise: Write a short play, story, or poem that, like Morrison’s *Desdemona* or Cobb’s *American Moor*, re-vision the Shakespearean source in a way that is expansive, creative, and/or resistant
- Write a long “letter to the editor” or quasi-manifesto explaining the value and purpose of reading Shakespeare in our world today (optional: connect to BLM, election, pandemic, etc.)
- Complete an annotated bibliography of four or so articles on a theme of your choosing
- Write a second analytical essay (1500-2000 words)
- Record a couple of episodes of a podcast related to one of the themes of the course.
- Make short filmic adaptation (3-4 minutes?), produced on your phone, or any technology available, that offers a theory or interpretation of a given play. Obviously there will be limits to what you can do, but you will want to do as much as you can to create an appropriate setting, costumes, characterization, props, animation, music, and etc. You can play one part or several (have any wigs handy?). These should be accompanied by a short discussion (5 minutes, or accompanying 1-2 pp. informal essay) explaining your choices as a director and/or actor.
- Draft a proposal for a community-based or service-learning project incorporating Shakespeare and social justice in some capacity (explore [Bonner Center](#) for ideas)
- Research organizations, theaters, or programs that do social justice work in public settings. Write a grant proposal as if you were yourself applying to create such a program. Or: write a cover letter applying for a hypothetical dream job in one of these organizations, which includes your vision for how to expand or develop their mission
- I’m very open to other ideas; run them by me.

Final (self-)reflection (email to me on **December 13 by 4PM**)

Where have your thinking and skills grown most this semester? What personal strategies enabled you learn most, and what have you contributed that has enabled *others* to learn? With this class under your belt, what do you look forward to learning more about in the future? How has the ongoing pandemic and/or uprising and/or disruption to higher education and/or presidential election influenced how you have thought about and worked through the material of this course? What has been hardest about learning during this time, and what has been surprisingly easiest or most beneficial? What have you learned about yourself as a learner in the process?

#### HONOR CODE:

*Please be aware of Oberlin College’s honor code, which this class will closely observe. **You will show your understanding of the policy by writing and signing the honor code (“I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment”)** at the bottom of every assignment. No work will be accepted without your affirmation of this pledge. Please especially note the strictures against PLAGIARISM, which means using not just precise language, but also concepts from another source without attribution. Since academic integrity is the foundation of all true intellectual exchange, any evidence of plagiarism on the part of a student will result in a minimum penalty of an “F” for the essay in question and a citation; PENALTY MAY ALSO INCLUDE A GRADE OF “F” FOR THE COURSE. If you have any questions about proper citation, please ask! A final thought: never “fudge” when it comes to matters of integrity.*

For more information about the Honor System please see: [www.oberlin.edu/students.links-life/rules-regs.html](http://www.oberlin.edu/students.links-life/rules-regs.html)

### OFFICE HOURS:

I will hold virtual office hours **Mondays from 2:45-5:15**. No need to email; just sign up [here](#). Please do your best to attend during this block of time, but if that is impossible, email me with your availability and we will make other arrangements. In order to make space for all students, appointments will be limited to 15 minutes, although we can set up subsequent meetings for any unanswered questions or concerns. Please sign up at least 8 hours in advance of the meeting. Thanks for understanding!

EMAIL: I will respond to email as quickly as I can, but it can take up to 48 hours given my workload. I also generally try to maintain an electronic fast/Sabbath/sanity break on Friday nights and Saturdays. Thanks for understanding.

### A note about Shakespeare's language:

In this course, we will be reading a half dozen Shakespeare plays, about one every two weeks, along with a couple of contemporary plays and several critical essays. If your schedule allows, students are *strongly* urged to read each of the plays not once, but twice: 100% of my previous students who have followed this advice affirm that it has vastly improved their understanding and enjoyment (and grades).

Renaissance Literature is often the oldest students encounter that is not “translated” or modernized, so the reading may go slowly at first. It is a requirement of this course that you read with your pencil or .pdf highlighter in hand: underline interesting and repeated words, striking images, unusual settings: anything that jumps out at you when you read. You might also make marginal notes with your questions, summarized plot points, or observations on particular words, images, or ideas

Finally, when you find yourself stuck, slow down and *read aloud*. The ear is sometimes smarter than the eye. You could also try rewriting by hand a particularly dense passage early in the semester: you might find that that alone makes the meaning transparent! Try these tips, and by midterm time you will be delighted by how much easier it has already gotten.

**\*And, finally, a note about the plays chosen for this class:** Some of the plays here are those you would expect to see in a traditional class on Shakespearean Comedy (e.g. *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*). Others, although still comedies, are more explicitly troubling or “problematic” in current contexts (e.g. *Measure for Measure* and *Merchant of Venice*). I have included one play, *The Tempest*, which we now classify as a Romance but which, since it ends in a marriage, would have counted as comedy to Shakespeare. And I have also actually included a tragedy, *Othello*, since it provides such rich access to contemporary social justice questions. As we will see, it also features several troubling comedic features—at its hero's expense (by the way, so does *Romeo and Juliet*, but more on that later). Lastly, I have left space in the syllabus for a student choice play, which we will decide on by discussion and vote (good news: there are no bad choices). If we collectively find that the pace of the syllabus has been too ambitious for our current circumstances, then we will instead use that time to spread out our work.



## SCHEDULE

### Week 1 Why Shakespeare and Social Justice



By Friday PM: Introduce yourself on slack with an informal post on these questions: 1) what is something you are really interested in (deliberately broad)? 2) What has your previous experience or impression of Shakespeare been like (be honest)? 3) What is your first impression of the idea that Shakespeare and social justice can speak to each other? 4) extra credit for photos of your cat, dog, or random cool thing.



By Wednesday: [Nelson Mandela and the Robben Island Shakespeare](#)  
[James Baldwin, "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare"](#)

Atwood and Williamson, ["Plague and Protest Go Hand in Hand"](#)

Hyman and Eklund, "Making Meaning and Doing Justice with Early Modern Texts"

(M) Aug 31           **Zoom (entire class)**

(W) Sept 2           **Zoom (group A)**

(F) Sept 4           **Zoom (group B)**

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### Week 2 Merchant of Venice



By Wednesday: read *Merchant of Venice*  
[Smithsonian article](#) on anti-Semitism in *MV*

Rosen, "The Rhetoric of Exclusion: Jew, Moor, and the Boundaries of Discourse..."



Listen: [How Whiteness Dominates the Study of Shakespeare](#) (Start at minute 39)



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class

(M) Sept 7           **No class** (Labor Day); *Merchant of Venice* lecture posted

(W) Sept 9           **Zoom (group A)** *Merchant of Venice* discussion

(F) Sept 11          **Zoom (group B)** *Merchant of Venice* discussion

### Week 3 Merchant of Venice



By Sunday: watch *Merchant of Venice* (dir. Michael Radford, 2004) [via Box](#)



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class



By Monday: Espinosa, “Chicano Shakespeare: The Bard, the Border, and the Peripheries...”

By Wednesday: Dadabhoy, [Looking for Mercy in the Merchant of Venice](#)



Recommended: Wednesday 3PM EST: Amberen Dadabhoy “‘Othello was a lie’: Shakespeare and Race” Lecture via St. Anne’s; [tune in via fb](#) (recommended)

(M) Sept 14            **Visiting Professor Ruben Espinosa** (synchronous)

(W) Sept 16            **Zoom (group A)** *Merchant of Venice* discussion

(F) Sept 18            **Zoom (group B)** *Merchant of Venice* discussion

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### Week 4 Othello



By Monday: Read *Othello*

By Wednesday: Read Kim Hall, Introduction to *Things of Darkness*

Justin Shaw, [“Othello, Disability, and the Failures of Care”](#)



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class



First relevance “current events” reflection due (on slack, post by 4PM Sunday 27th)

(M) Sept 21            *Othello* lecture posted

(W) Sept 23            **Zoom (group A):** *Othello* discussion

(F) Sept 25            **Zoom (group B):** *Othello* discussion

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### Week 5 Othello and its afterlives



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class



By Wednesday: Read *American Moor*

By Friday: Read *Desdemona*

Recommended: Read Sheila Rose Bland, “How I would direct *Othello*”

(M) Sept 28            **No class** (Yom Kippur) posted for Tuesday: [Shakespeare and Blackface](#)

(W) Sept 30            **Visiting Professor Aldo Billingslea** (synchronous); read *American Moor*

(F) Oct 2                **Zoom (whole class);** read *Desdemona*

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## Week 6 As You Like It



By Monday: Read *As You Like It*

No other readings; staged reading scene due next week



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class

(M) Oct 5            **Visiting Professor Derrick Higginbotham** (asynchronous)  
(W) Oct 7            **Zoom (group A)** *AYLI*  
(F) Oct 9            **Zoom (group B)** *AYLI*

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## Week 7 As You Like It



Kemp, “Transgender Shakespeare Performance: A Holistic Dramaturgy” and  
“Shakespeare in Transition: Pedagogies of Transgender Justice and Performance”



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class



Due Friday: virtual scene performance and group analysis (email by 4PM)

(M) Oct 12            **Zoom (group A)** *AYLI*  
(W) Oct 14            **Zoom (group B)** *AYLI*  
(Th) Oct 15            Erika Lin **interview with Keith Hamilton Cobb**; [register now](#) for  
access to a special, limited performance of *American Moor*  
(F) Oct 16            NO CLASS: Mental health/catch-up day

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## Week 8 Twelfth Night



By Wednesday: Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette* (recommended; if you have Netflix)



By Monday: Read *Twelfth Night*



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class

(M) Oct 19            **Visiting Professor Sawyer Kemp** (synchronous)  
(W) Oct 21            **Zoom (group A)** *Twelfth Night*  
(F) Oct 23            **Zoom (group B)** *Twelfth Night*

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## Week 9 Twelfth Night/Measure for Measure



By Wednesday: Read *Measure for Measure*

By Friday: Knoppers, (En)gendering Shame



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class

(M) Oct 26

**Zoom (entire class):** *Twelfth Night* & *AYLI* entire class discussion

(W) Oct 28

*Measure for Measure* lecture posted (\*note off-cycle posting)

(F) Oct 30

**Zoom (entire class):** *Measure for Measure* discussion

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## Week 10 Measure for Measure



Charlene Smith, [“Staging Sexual Assault Responsibly”](#)



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class



Essay (1500-2000 words) due by email November 6 at noon

(M) Nov 2

**Visiting Professor Katie Vomero Santos** (synchronous)

(W) Nov 4

**Zoom (group A)** *Measure for Measure*

(F) Nov 6

**Zoom (group B)** *Measure for Measure*

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## Week 11 Student choice play



By Monday: TBD



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class

(M) Nov 9

mystery play lecture posted

(W) Nov 11

**Zoom (group A)**

(F) Nov 13

**Zoom (group B)**

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## Week 12 Student choice play



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack

By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class

(M) Nov 16

**Zoom (group A)**

(W) Nov 18

**Zoom (group B)**

(F) Nov 20      *Tempest* lecture posted (\*note off-cycle posting)

### Week 13    *The Tempest*



By Monday: Read *The Tempest*  
Young, “How have postcolonial approaches enriched Shakespeare’s Works”



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack  
By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class

(M) Nov 23      **Visiting Professor Sandra Young** (synchronous)  
(W) Nov 25      Thanksgiving (No class)  
(F) Nov 27      Thanksgiving (No class)

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### Week 14    *The Tempest*



Watch *The Foreigner’s Home*



No additional reading: finalize student projects



By Tuesday PM: post discussion question for class on slack  
By Friday PM: respond to something another student has posted on slack *or* said in class



Student Choice projects due (by email, December 7 at 4PM)



Final reflection/self-analysis (by email December 13 at 4PM)

(M) November 30    **Zoom (group A)**  
(W) December 2    **Zoom (group B)**  
(F) December 4    Whole class

(M) December 7    Conclusion (whole class)



*I gratefully acknowledge the (direct and indirect) help I received from colleagues while developing this syllabus. In particular I want to thank Marissa Greenberg, Hillary Eklund, Ayanna Thompson, Ambereen Dadabhoj, Nedda Mehdizadeh, and our visiting speakers Ruben Espinosa, Derrick Higginbotham, Sawyer Kemp, Katie Vomero Santos, and Sandra*

Young, I also made grateful use of general resources provided by the Shakespeare Association of America, the Renaissance Society of America, Race B4 Race, and the Folger Shakespeare Library.

“FORMAL INNOVATION (OF THE SORT THAT MATTERS IN LITERATURE) IS A TESTING OF THE OPERATIONS OF MEANING, AND IS THEREFORE A KIND OF ETHICAL EXPERIMENTATION. TO RESPOND TO THE DEMAND OF THE LITERARY WORK *AS THE DEMAND OF THE OTHER* IS TO ATTEND TO IT AS A UNIQUE EVENT WHOSE HAPPENING IS A CALL, A CHALLENGE, AN OBLIGATION: UNDERSTAND HOW LITTLE YOU UNDERSTAND ME, TRANSLATE MY UNTRANSLATABILITY, LEARN ME BY HEART...”

-DEREK ATTRIDGE,  
*THE SINGULARITY OF LITERATURE*