Shakespeare’s Histories
-and-
GAME OF THRONES

“For God’s sake, let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings; / How some have been deposed; some slain in war, / Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed ....”

Richard II III.ii.155-158

Shakespeare’s chronicle histories are among his richest, most complex and most rewarding plays, but they have traditionally presented challenges for students who are unfamiliar with the details of medieval history. That said, the recent popularity of George R. R. Martin’s best-selling fantasy series Game of Thrones, and the television series which is based upon them, has familiarized our culture with a host of medieval tropes (siegecraft, trial by combat, dynastic marriage) which provide potential entrance points to the plays.

In this course we will read four of Shakespeare’s great histories (Richard II, Henry IV pt 1, Henry IV pt 2, and Henry V), in part through the lens of Game of Thrones, and will subject them to intense, critically informed analysis. We will pay particular attention to topics including historical context, critical reception, and language. We will also view three film adaptations which your professor feels are particularly illuminating.

While the course will make periodic reference to the Game of Thrones books and television series, those texts are not required for the course, and your professor will assume no particular familiarity with them. The course will focus on the plays.

The purpose of this course is to acquaint the student with the central components and themes of Shakespeare’s major histories, and prepare said student for secondary teaching or graduate-level study. Course requirements will include one lengthy, researched essay in addition to periodic shorter assignments. Participation in class discussion is assumed.

Prerequisite: English 205 and one 300-level survey, preferably English 324