

## Acted Over: Staging Revolution

Graduate Seminar (German 580, English 552)

Ellwood Wiggins

“How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown?” (Cassius in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*)



Left: Harriet Walter as Brutus, *Julius Caesar*, dir. Phyllida Lloyd, Donmar Warehouse, London, 2017

Right: Paterson Joseph as Brutus, *Julius Caesar*, dir. Gregory Doran, RSC, Stratford-on-Avon, 2012

Performances of revolution confront us with the specter of both literary and historical structures of repetition. Marx’s *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire* casts this problem as a generic one in which history appears twice: “first as tragedy, then as farce.” By repeating tropes and gestures from previous rebellions, revolutions are “fathered” by historical parallels. What weird incestuous violence is at work when, in the words of Büchner’s Danton, “the revolution, like Saturn, devours its own children”? This famous *bon mot* itself is repeated in mutating variations both before and after it is uttered in *Dantons Tod*. Do all intertextual acts, by repeating previous speech and writing, involve a kind of revolution – a cyclical logic of both revolt and return?

In this course, we will explore these questions in theatrical (and theatrically inflected) representations of the French and Haitian revolutions: especially spectacles of these two revolutionary events of the 1790s by authors and for audiences who are neither French or Haitian. For Kant, the fascinated spectatorship of the French Revolution by people all over the world serves as the main evidence of progress in human history. The relative obscurity of the Haitian Revolution is perhaps the strongest argument to the contrary. Authors include: Mary Wollstonecraft, Heinrich Kleist, Georg Büchner, Anna Seghers, C.L.R. James, Langston Hughes, and Heiner Müller.

**Language:** Reading in original languages is encouraged, but knowledge of German and French is not required. All readings available in translation. Discussion in English.

### Seminar Meetings

Normally, we will open seminar by choosing one person to pose an opening question (see “opening question” below). This question will lead to an open conversation in which everyone should participate. After a break, I will share a reading of my own meant to be a provocation for further discussion.

### Course Requirements

- **Participation** (15% of final grade): Includes opening question when name is drawn. Full points awarded by default.
  - **Opening Question:** Pose some problem based on the text, something you found confusing, vexing, or surprising concerning a central issue. Focus on at most 3 sentences, and speak for about 5 minutes. After your presentation, the class will freely discuss the question.
- **Mini-paper** (10% of final grade): ~500 words. Two well-constructed paragraphs: first introduce a problem posed by the text(s) and then suggest a promising way to explore it. Due Feb 17.
- **Final paper** (75% of final grade): An **interpretive essay** (c.15 pages) that articulates a problem posed by the text(s) and explores this question through an engaged reading. A good paper will *develop* an idea over the course of a well-organized essay. You should introduce the stakes and motivation for your question, build an argument through cogent yet creative analysis, and clearly show what progress has been made in a conclusion. Students should meet with me to discuss their paper idea prior to Feb. 24. Due March 18.

### Syllabus

#### **Week      Reading**

1. Intro: Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* & Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties* (excerpt)
2. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Man* & Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (excerpts)
3. Poetry (Charlotte Smith, William Wordsworth, Friedrich Schiller, et al.)
4. Buck-Morss, „Hegel and Haiti“ & Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (excerpts)
5. Kleist, „Die Verlobung in St. Domingo“ / „The Betrothal in St. Domingo“
6. Büchner, *Dantons Tod* / *The Death of Danton*
7. Arendt, *On Revolution*
8. James, *The Black Jacobins*
9. Hughes, *The Emperor of Haiti* & Walcott, *Haitian Earth*
10. Müller, *Der Auftrag* / *The Task*

### Texts

- Most of these texts (as well as any required secondary literature) will be provided in digital format over Canvas.

- You should procure Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*. It is widely available online (and often in local bookshops, e.g., Magus), and the UW library has 2 copies.
- For other texts, I encourage you to locate recently edited, annotated editions (e.g., Penguin, Norton, or Oxford World's Classics for English; Reclam or DTV for German), especially for any works you wish to write about or pursue further.
- **Secondary literature:** On the canvas course homepage, there will be links to lists of influential texts about revolutions in general and those in France and Haiti in particular. For each of the individual works we read, I will suggest some scholarship on the canvas course website. In addition to completing the required readings and actively participating in class discussion, students are expected (as in any graduate-level class) to read extensively on their own. Please make use of the bibliographies in the suggested articles as well as research tools such as the MLA Bibliography.
- **Background:** There are plenty histories of the French Revolution to suit any political or dramatic taste. A helpful overview: William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (2001). For good general history of the Haitian Revolution, I recommend: Laurent Dubois, [\*Avengers of the New World\*](#) (2004); and the classic, exhilarating read: C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (1938/1962).