The critic Harold Bloom has argued that William Shakespeare is the first literary writer to invent truly three-dimensional fictional human beings: characters who, in hearing themselves think, proceed to develop. In so doing, they manifest vital personalities that are the result of a deep interiority. They interact in a vibrant, global context (call it the imaginative universe of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre) showing the extremities of the human condition. Betrayal, passionate first love, sibling rivalry, an unquenchable thirst for power, cunning, avarice, despair, madness—it’s all there. This course will be a discussion seminar focused on two key dimensions of Shakespeare’s originality: his poetic language and his genius for unfolding character. We will read one play per week, primarily from among the tragedies and romances, while knowing that these categories, like the ones below, are not absolute and frequently blend into each other.

Required texts: Signet editions, available in the Stanford Bookstore.

~ Villainy ~

Week 1 (1/12) Richard III
Week 2 (1/19) The Merchant of Venice
Week 3 (1/26) Othello

~ Monstrosity ~

Week 4 (2/2) Macbeth
Week 5 (2/9) The Tempest

~ Betrayal ~

Week 6 (2/16) Julius Caesar
Week 7 (2/23) King Lear
Week 8 (3/2) Hamlet

~ Seduction ~

Week 9 (3/9) Measure for Measure
Week 10 (3/16) Antony and Cleopatra

♦ If you are taking the class for credit, you must attend all classes unless excused.
♦ If you are taking the class for a grade, you must turn in a final 8–10pp. paper assignment by the last day of class.