

# *J.P.SOMMERVILLE*

367

## SOCIETY AND IDEAS IN SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND



Instructor: Johann Sommerville (email [jsommerv@wisc.edu](mailto:jsommerv@wisc.edu))

Office Hours: 5214 Humanities, 4-5 on Thursdays and by appointment.

This course is about society and ideas in England during Shakespeare's lifetime (1564-1616) and, more generally, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a whole. In that period, English population doubled, and though the economy grew more sophisticated, the country's resources were barely sufficient to feed the increased population. Poverty and vagrancy spread. People competed for scarce jobs, and to gain an advantage in the competition tried to improve their educational attainments. In order to get more food from the soil people became increasingly interested in new agricultural techniques and scientific ideas. As education and science spread, so old attitudes came under attack. The ferment in ideas contributed to political conflict which culminated in the Civil War of 1642-6 and the execution of the king (and abolition of monarchy) in 1649. Intellectual and social changes were also closely linked to the great flowering of English literature and culture in the age of Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Hobbes and Locke.

The course will explore the nature and development of English society, and the emergence of new social, political and religious ideas. Themes surveyed will include the impact of massive population growth on the English economy and social structure; the spread of scientific thinking and the decay of belief in witchcraft; patriarchalist social and political theories; radical and democratic political ideas, including the thinking of the Levellers (who advocated manhood suffrage), and Diggers (who wanted the abolition of private property); new religious groups such as the Quakers (who included revolutionaries as well as pacifists), and Fifth Monarchists (who expected the imminent second coming of Christ); and the contrasting political thinking of authoritarians like Hobbes and anti-authoritarians like

Locke.

In addition to surveying social history in Shakespeare's England, and the history of ideas about society and politics, the course will also discuss the religious thinking of Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and various radical groups which emerged in the mid-seventeenth century. It was from the struggle between these various groups that religious toleration emerged by the end of the seventeenth century. It was also in the late-seventeenth century that belief in witchcraft faded amongst educated people. The final part of the course will discuss popular and elite ideas about witches, and about such things as ghosts, fairies, omens and astrology.

Course objectives include (1) to foster an understanding of societies very different from our own; (2) to enrich appreciation of Shakespeare and other writers of the period by investigating their context; (3) to show how and why attitudes which we take for granted first came into being; and (4) to enhance critical and analytical thinking, and communication skills.

### **Course requirements**

### **Course schedule**

