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# Close Reading: The Theory Which is Not One

JESSICA MCCALL

In *Close Reading: An Introduction to Literature*, Elisabeth Howe states,

A close reading analyzes poems or short passages of prose in depth. It is also called explication, a word from a Latin verb meaning ‘to unfold.’ Explication unfolds the text’s meaning in relation to its formal and structural elements; it allows you the student—and indeed any reader—to examine the language and structure of a work as a function of its content, i.e., of the ideas, images or emotions it expresses.<sup>1</sup>

In *How to Read a Poem* Terry Eagleton begins by saying,

The idea that literary theorists killed poetry dead because with their shriveled hearts and swollen brains they are incapable of spotting a metaphor, let alone a tender feeling, is one of the more obtuse critical platitudes of our time. The truth is that almost all major literary theorists engage in scrupulously close reading. . . Close reading is not the issue. The question is not how tenaciously you cling to the text, but what you are in search of when you do so.<sup>2</sup>

What I find of particular value in these two quotes is the way they contrast the difference between epistemologies: Howe’s approach to close reading—admittedly an approach aimed at and written for undergraduates—assumes a structural analysis that can be undertaken in discrete, manageable chunks, by any dedicated reader. Eagleton’s text, by contrast, doesn’t simply argue for the necessity of considering the politicization of language but reminds us it is always already there. The theoretical underpinnings that define and bound this practice of “close reading” and also the epistemological roads to interpretation are more than a matter of academic squabbling or mere ideological difference. Form, function, and content are all important pieces of the textual puzzle but, as Eagleton points out, they exist within discourse and to forget that is to willfully blind ourselves to what we are in search of when we tenaciously cling to a text.

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Reading and interpretation—acts not synonymous with criticism but necessary precursors—are acts of meaning-making. Ann Berthoff states,

When we read critically, we are reading for meaning—and that is not the same thing as reading for “message.” Meanings are not things, and finding them is not like going on an Easter egg hunt. Meanings are relationships: they are unstable, shifting, dynamic; they do not stay still nor can we prove the authenticity or the validity of one or another meaning that we find.<sup>3</sup>

The epistemology of reading, therefore, is not a positivistic pursuit. When undertaking the act of meaning-making through analysis, critical readers learn not to find the “right” answer, but rather to consider the multiplicity of answers inherent in a text—a multiplicity which takes shape into individual meanings through a variety of ideological schemata that structure and bound not only the text itself, but also the imaginative possibilities of the critical reader.

We engage in these schemata in part by choosing our theoretical lens: we prioritize ideologies and space/time to narrow and focus the chaos of meaning thereby allowing textual dialogues to form around particular nexus points. Do we historicize and if so how? Do we discuss form, content, or both? Do we consider/use/teach this edition or that one? Do we attempt to remove the critical speaker from the conversation or acknowledge that all knowledge is formed, disseminated, and debated by human beings? These are not small questions and, whether they are explicitly acknowledged in a conversation or not, they drive how we close read, what meaning we make while close reading, and what conclusions seem not only logical but *possible*. If close reading is taught as a method of reading for message instead of making meaning, it becomes employed as an approach to textual interpretation that leads to quantifiable knowledge—a method understood to produce predictable, quantifiable results if undertaken with appropriate rigorous thought (see the S.A.T.). Within this construction close reading is a tool of logical positivism and tied to explicating only what can be certain. Every answer to an English test cannot be “all of the above if argued with cleverness.” The S.A.T. and other mandated assessments create a hierarchy of knowledge where “literary interpretation” becomes synonymous with “answer” and “right.” This forces the acts of reading and interpretation to conform to a positivistic model.

One example of positivistic close reading are the No Fear Shakespeare “translations.” No Fear Shakespeare is a product of the company SparkNotes (a subsidiary of Barnes & Noble) which offers online synopsis and textual breakdowns as well as “test prep” and released their line of Shakespeare “translations” starting in 2003. No Fear Shakespeare bills their “translations” as “plain english” that “anyone can read.” Difficulties with presenting Shakespeare in secondary classrooms are often reported as stemming from an inability to relate to the text which renders understanding, and therefore meaning-making, impossible. In her online article for *Buzzfeed*, “Why I Hate Shakespeare,” Krystie Lee Yandoli tells the story of reading *Hamlet* in sixth grade. Yandoli relates, “I

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sifted through the yellow, plastic hardcover book that creaked with each turn of the page, and all I learned was that Early Modern English hurt my brain and I couldn't seem to wrap my head around it."<sup>4</sup> Yandoli goes on to share a moment and sentiment experienced by countless students struggling with Shakespeare in the classroom when she says, "I didn't rely on SparkNotes because I wanted to cheat my way through it; I simply wanted to understand what was going on in words and terms that were tangible to me."<sup>5</sup> For Yandoli turning to SparkNotes *was* close reading; it was through SparkNotes that she was able to explicate the text. Berthoff states that "meanings don't just happen: we make them; we find and form them"<sup>6</sup> and Levi-Strauss argues that to mean "means the ability of any kind of data to be translated in a different language...different words on a different level."<sup>7</sup> No Fear Shakespeare was Yandoli's "different words on a different level" and she made meaning of Shakespeare, she examined the ideas, images and emotions expressed, by turning to SparkNotes as a reader of the Bedford or Norton editions would turn to footnotes.

This is what No Fear Shakespeare claims to offer on their first page. Their close reading has led to a translation into "the kind of English people actually speak today."<sup>8</sup> In bold black letters at the top of the page are the words "FEAR NOT." They then make an appeal to students such as Yandoli, asking, "Have you ever found yourself looking at a Shakespeare play, then down at the footnotes, then back at the play, and still not understanding? You know what the individual words mean, but they don't add up."<sup>9</sup> Through SparkNotes a young reader, much like Yandoli with *Hamlet*, is promised not only understanding of the play, but also the ability to read "Shakespeare's own words fearlessly" and to "actually [enjoy] it."<sup>10</sup> Sparknotes' side-by-side "translation" helps students "sort out what's happening, who's saying what, and why."<sup>11</sup> However, while Shakespeare is rendered tangible to students like Yandoli, the positivistic "translation" is not an ideologically neutral act and "we have to be alert to the fact that meanings can be arrived at too quickly, the possibility of other meanings being too abruptly foreclosed."<sup>12</sup> To see the consequences of these foreclosures I turn to *Macbeth* and a comparison of the Bedford edition and the No Fear Shakespeare "translation."

The first lines of Lady Macbeth's speech from 1.5 in the Bedford edition of *Macbeth* are, "The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements."<sup>13</sup> By contrast the No Fear Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth* "translates" these lines as, "So the messenger is short of breath, like a hoarse raven, as he announces Duncan's entrance into my fortress, where he will die." The symbol of the raven as the messenger, one which carries multiple allegorical overtones as it intersects with images of the raven as harbinger or carrier of the dead, is lost entirely as the messenger ceases to be the raven, and instead simply sounds like a "hoarse raven." The literal meaning of the text, that a message has arrived, is made explicit at the cost of foreshadowing, theme, and imagery. The shift from "fatal entrance of Duncan" to "Duncan's entrance. . .where he will die" also changes how these lines fit thematically with larger allusions to fate; in the Bedford, Duncan's fate is sealed the moment he enters "under [her] battlements" as opposed to the No Fear Shakespeare where Duncan enters, and will—sometime in the future—die. For a play exploring the paradox of free will and

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prophecy the point at which Duncan dies is far less precise than Macbeth's off-stage murder between 2.1 and 2.2. There are also a host of interesting overtones in the phrase "Duncan's entrance into my fortress" that play in fascinating ways into the alteration of Lady Macbeth's gender performance that aren't necessarily present in "under my battlements."

The problem here is not that No Fear Shakespeare rewrites Shakespeare—cinematic adaptations, fandom, and modern theater productions decide which lines to keep, cut, and edit; the issue is the subject position held by No Fear Shakespeare's "translations" and the way those translations uphold a positivistic notion of reading for message. There is a mighty need for a product to render Shakespeare "tangible," to ease the "hurt brain," and capitalism has produced a product to fill this need. The understanding of the play offered by No Fear Shakespeare still allows a classroom to explore the legitimacy of the witches' prophecy: would Macbeth have become king regardless because it was destined to be true? And if prophecy is real and destiny written, how can we know if Macbeth made the choice to kill Duncan or if that choice was taken from him? Interesting, philosophical conversations can follow, students gain the cultural literacy of *Macbeth* and the history of what it means to be "human," debates over consciousness and free will, and the role the Early Modern period and Shakespeare played in shaping our current understandings of those issues can be discussed. Yandoli can wrap her head around this. These are words and terms that are tangible.

However, because No Fear Shakespeare relies on a simplified, literal "translation" of *Macbeth* the figurative nature of language—all of the uncertainty present in any signification until a particular usage ties that signification to meaning through context and ideological schemata—is pruned to guarantee certainty. No Fear Shakespeare cannot allow uncertainty of meaning because "chaos is scary"<sup>14</sup> and it is "absolutely impossible to conceive of meaning without order."<sup>15</sup> No Fear Shakespeare is not one director/editor/critic's interpretation of Shakespeare; it is the authoritative reading of Barnes & Noble—a capitalist institution of knowledge—promising any reader understanding. Duncan is coming to the castle. He will be murdered. Lady Macbeth is not nice. This pruning to certainty allows meaning to be made of Shakespeare, but forecloses on any meanings that must be approached through ambiguity or unfurled through uncertain consideration. In the case of No Fear Shakespeare, what can be explicated from the text through close reading is not designed for the discovery and generation of meaning; it is merely a logical puzzle with one, most logical, answer.

With increasing pressures to produce an educational product as quantified and qualified through state and nationally administered assessment, No Fear Shakespeare may be the only viable answer unless educational practices and mandated assessments of what meanings are allowed to be made are reevaluated. For many readers like Yandoli, the difficulty of Shakespeare is not something to be overcome or struggled with, but a gateway to pass through, a stamp of accomplishment. The literacies of history, allusion, and classical mythology necessary to understand jokes, characterization, and plot devices are woefully out of reach for most students caught in the vortex of being over-tested and under-

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served. The message communicated about Shakespeare from his placement on tests, gatekeeping entry into higher education, to his jokes being misread and appropriated as “high art” is that Shakespeare has value because not everyone can understand him. And that is true, not everyone can understand him, but the reasons for that lack—or impossibility—of understanding are what should be pressed on. Pressing on those reasons begins by reexamining how we closely read Shakespeare.

What Yandoli could not have understood in sixth grade and what is missing in any definition of close reading as something “any reader” can do, are the competing discourses and assumed value-judgements before the act of “reading” even begins. Yandoli’s phrase “hurt my brain,” so easily overlooked and dismissed, is actually a moment to dig in to. Yandoli is self-aware of this dismissal when she says, “I walked into class the next day and didn’t tell any of my classmates what I did—because I thought I was alone, dumb, and probably way in over my head.”<sup>16</sup> More is at work in the case of Yandoli and countless others like her than an inability to explicate, and the intersection of close reading and Shakespeare presents an interesting avenue for exploring it. While chaos is scary and uncertainty frustrating, a plethora of meanings are waiting to be made—Berthoff argues that, “the meanings that emerge from [chaos], which can be discerned taking shape within it, can be discovered only if students who are learning . . . can learn to tolerate ambiguity.”<sup>17</sup> Close reading is tenaciously clinging to a text, turning the words and significations into anchor points, “points of reference which might allow us to navigate, with some semblance of intention and confidence, towards some clearly perceived goals.”<sup>18</sup> But clinging to the text does not mean limiting what we might be in search of as we do; if close reading is detached from an idea of finding the “right” answer and reimagined as a method for generating meaning it becomes an avenue into the uncertain and exploration of the uncertain is what pushes on and rewrites discursive boundaries of what’s possible and, therefore, real.

There is a boundary, or, perhaps a more apt metaphor, there are the places from and within which a reader can make meaning. Away from and outside of those places there is chaos. This chaos has as many names as philosophers who have named it and, if knowledge is conceived as metaphorically linear, then we need only understand this place—observe it, define it, and control it—to better understand our thinking. This conception of knowledge is precisely what Derrida argues against, however, through critiques of the origin. Rather than conceive of knowledge as linear, I imagine this chaos as the center Derrida theorized holds structures in place; these structures are then bounded through what Foucault names “discursive boundaries” and the meaning that can be made is in turn limited to what material exists within the bounded structure. The post-structuralist view of language altered the discursive boundaries allowing previously inconceivable meaning to be made; suddenly language—and alongside language all thought, knowledge, and signification—was an “endless play of signifiers which [could] never be . . . nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning.”<sup>19</sup> And yet, despite this endless play of signifiers “ideas in any field are not only what we think *about*;

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they are what we think *with*.”<sup>20</sup> This means signifiers don’t have to be nailed down because they are always already bounded. The center always holds.

I think meaning cannot be made without the center so I am not arguing to loosen it; with no structure there is no order and without order no meaning-making. However, what the center holds—or perhaps even the center itself—could be rewritten. To explore this idea I am using a conceptual metaphor of space, working from Lakoff and Nunez’s definition that a “conceptual metaphor is a cognitive mechanism for allowing us to reason about one kind of thing as if it were another.”<sup>21</sup> I imagine knowing to be as vast and far-reaching as a universe: the discursive boundaries are the limits of what I can see and observe—outside my known universe could exist anything, so there must be a balance between useful exploration and wild tales of signification beyond the trace. One thread waiting to be tugged on is the piece holding this conceptual universe together; that thing is myth—it is like a dark energy that cannot be seen or measured in and of itself, but its effects and consequences are visible through the ideologies and structures it generates and is regenerated by. This understanding of myth builds from Jung, Levi-Strauss, Barthes, and others and can be seen as it takes shape in the theorizing of what Levi-Strauss described as “get[ting] thought in man unbeknownst to him.”<sup>22</sup> Myth is not the origin or the center; myths are the particles that allow those pieces of the structures to form, eventually building structures from that. There is nothing necessarily new in this conception of myth, but it is a conception which has allowed me to make meaning. Eagleton points out in *After Theory*, “we are living now in the aftermath of what one might call high theory. . . . The older generation . . . proved a hard act to follow. . . . For the moment, however, we are still trading on the past.”<sup>23</sup> My point is not to say something new because I am not sure anything is ever really “new;” rather, I think meaning seems new when the limits of our knowing change and shift revealing territory previously inaccessible to a particular discursive community at a particular moment in space-time.

In her book, *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong argues a myth “is true because it is effective not because it gives us factual information.”<sup>24</sup> The meaning generated because of and in conjunction with myth is recognized as valid if the particles form pieces that effectively feel ordered. Historically, we look for rationale that justifies that ordering rather than considering why it seemed ordered in the first place. Barthes states that “Myth is a system of communication . . . it is a message” and “myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message.”<sup>25</sup> Myths generate meanings which build ordered structures and, from that, perceived reality. Armstrong says that “myth is about the unknown; it is about that for which initially we have no words” and that “myth is not a story for its own sake. It shows us how we should behave.”<sup>26</sup> Mythic structure is another kind of anchor point; as Derrida pointed out, the only material we have to work with is the material that’s already there. This is why the quest for certainty is also a quest in support of myth. Catherine Belsey states that “existing meanings are not ours to command. . . . To reproduce existing meanings exactly is also to reaffirm the knowledges our culture takes for granted, and the values that precede us—the norms.”<sup>27</sup> Once recognized, a reader can attempt to read

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against a specific myth, but there are always more myths bounding the construction of any critique. We cannot make meaning without myth (at least so far as I can tell); it bonds the atoms of order together so that they can hold shape. We can, however, remythologize it.

If every possible answer exists in symbiotic relationship with the current formulations of myth and what we want—or even need—is to remythologize, then uncertainty is one way of imagining the impossible into being and close reading for the goal of being uncertain—with the anchor point of text it provides—can be a key methodology for boldly going who knows where. With these ideas in mind—the relationship between myth and meaning-making and the uses of close reading for discovery and analysis of uncertainty—I return to Yandoli and Shakespeare.

I begin with the question how do we logically engage in the illogical? In the case of Yandoli, why does Shakespeare (as have many other texts for many other students) hurt her brain? Something is at work in Yandoli's narrative that indicates explication of the text was not only difficult but impossible; furthermore, her inability to explicate Shakespeare goes on to affect her sense of worth as described when she states, “throughout my entire academic career and even in professional circles, I couldn't help but feel insecure about my lack of enthusiasm for Shakespeare.”<sup>28</sup> This can be explained in part through access to various literacies and systemic power structures as embodied through education and cultural value, but I think there is more than one myth of power at work and they are exerting a number of influences that directly affect Yandoli's, and anyone else's, ability to “close read.”

I want to focus on the intersection of three myths at work here: they are the myth of Shakespeare making meaning about what kind of people “get” Shakespeare; the myth of education about what “smart” readers and “good” students are able to accomplish, and the myth of knowledge limiting the possibilities of meaning-making and driving that need to find “the right” answer. All of these are intersecting and applying pressure through culture, the classroom, and the teacher, and this pressure coalesces into power. One of the side-effects of this power can be a “hurt” brain. Students are asked to accomplish a task they are incapable of completing with a text that intimidates and is inaccessible to them under pressure from the unstated but omnipresent belief that their value and intelligence are tied to their ability to succeed.

No Fear Shakespeare is the inevitable result of an epistemology that bounded and purposed close reading as a tool for policing interpretation. It is implied that if one is literate then one need only understand what words mean and put the puzzle together, and a word's meaning is encapsulated within the multitude of precise definitions available in a dictionary. Of course, words have more than one definition, and they don't always mean what they mean—sometimes they are used figuratively. And then there is tone, the inflection and the changing of meaning through the context of a text—and context must often be sussed out and understood through the variety of intersecting literacies a reader brings with them (including but not limited to: cultural, mythological, dialect, historical). But myths of positivism that intersect specifically with the requirements of supremacist



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capitalist notions of “product” demand an epistemology of reading and interpretation that produce singular, precise answers, and in order to ensure this there must be a technique built from an observable process that produces the same result each time. An understanding of close reading that maintains “any dedicated reader” can explicate “any text” generates the requirement of a product that makes texts tangible; and *No Fear Shakespeare*, by removing the need for readers to grapple and struggle with unfamiliar language or the frustrating imprecision of figurative language, ensures more readers who cannot explicate difficult texts no matter how dedicated. Myths of knowledge as precise are regenerated and tendrils of power that reach into education, consumer culture, academia, and elsewhere perpetuate unnoticed. Students are still over-tested and under-funded; reading is still about message not meaning-making; memorization and reproduction, not creativity and imagination, remain most rewarded.

Armstrong argues “there is never a single, orthodox version of a myth,” and indeed there is no single, orthodox version of Shakespeare.<sup>29</sup> But there are the pressures of authority, fed by myths of authenticity, that equate difficulty with quality in learning. I think there is a conflation here, however; making meaning out of chaos is always a struggle and struggle is difficult, but not all difficulties “hurt the brain” in the same way. The subjective aesthetics of the Romantics are often criticized for offering little in the way of rigorous thought but the hyper-positivism of the twentieth century has not proved much better. Northrop Frye’s appeals to the necessity of criticism show a particular notion of rigor as the answer to malleable subjectivity. Frye argues that criticism must be a “structure of thought and knowledge . . . in its own right, with some measure of independence from the art it deals with,”<sup>30</sup> and that “[t]he presence of science in any subject changes its character from the casual to the causal, from the random and intuitive to the systematic, as well as safe-guarding the integrity of that subject from external invasions.”<sup>31</sup> Systematic. Causal. Integrity. This process preserves the integrity of objectivity and good science. Good science is good thinking and that is something good students do. Failure to think this way is failure to produce worthwhile, serious thought. Centuries of systemic power fed by myths of knowledge as they have been formed and given structure in Western philosophies press down on sixth graders and their unenthusiastic response is misread as lack of appreciation. No wonder brains hurt.

*No Fear Shakespeare* is the antithesis of Frye, but it is simultaneously the inevitable result of tightly guarded boundaries of knowledge—fueled in part by arguments like Frye’s—which generate competitive need to be “one of the good ones.” However, if scholarly criticism were to pursue meaning-making not in competition but as an act of loving discovery and comparison through conversation then we could loosen the boundaries of knowledge. This is not weakness but the strength to brave the paths of uncertainty and to help others learn to build them; that is the act of educators, not gate-keeping against such explorations because they are “immature,” or “over-simplified,” or subjective.

This is why the repurposing of close reading from a method of policing meaning to one of exploration is so exciting; close reading forces a reader to deal with the text and provides a starting place within the chaos. Close reading limits

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the possibilities of meaning and carves a path that can be followed creating more space from which critiques of critiques may be pursued. So long as we remember close reading is not the revelation and solving of the puzzle but the generation of it, that there are as many puzzles as there are readers, it becomes a discursive act with recognizable limits. Readers employing close reading can only explicate the meanings their individual socio-political positions allow them access to, but in recognizing that it remains one of the best techniques of logical analysis and can now be repurposed as a tool for discovering what we can't know.

Thinking rigorously about what we *don't* know or *can't* know is as useful as arguing for what seems true; there is value in trying to imagine the impossible into being. I do not think it is enough to explicate what we know; I think we must begin to explicate, as specifically as possible, what we do *not* know as well. This is an important point because as myth generates meaning it feeds the Foucauldian discursive boundaries which in turn limit and bound what is conceptualized—what can even be imagined. The systemic sense of “rightness” afforded No Fear Shakespeare and its prizing of certainty through literality demonstrates the dangerous bounding of both the real and the possible in its close reading for message and subsequent “translation” of Lady Macbeth and her gender performance.

In 1.5 Lady Macbeth cries,

Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here  
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full  
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;  
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
Th'effect and it!<sup>32</sup>

“Unsex me here” is a line that has received ample critical attention, but I return to it because its implications are powerful in our current cultural and political climate surrounding gender and bodies. Lady Macbeth does not necessarily ask that she be made a man: all that she asks is to be unsexed. Yes, the following lines about her “woman’s breasts” and her milk indicate a doing away with her femaleness, but doing away with femininity does not presuppose a binary.

However, No Fear Shakespeare interprets these lines as follows:

Come, you spirits that assist murderous thoughts,  
make me less like a woman and more like a man, and fill me  
from head to toe with deadly cruelty! Thicken my blood and  
clog up my veins so I won't feel remorse, so that no human  
compassion can stop my evil plan or prevent me from  
accomplishing it!<sup>33</sup>

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No Fear Shakespeare explicitly reasserts the gender binary back into Lady Macbeth's speech. "Make me less like a woman and more like a man" is a horrific phrase to read on the page—not because its meanings aren't implied in Shakespeare, but because in the Bedford edition those meanings exist alongside a multiplicity of options. Options that are written out of the "translation."

If "unsex me here" means "make me less like a woman and more like a man" *more* than it means something else (hence the decision to translate it as such) hegemonic heteronormative discourses of science, medicine, and linguistics remove the imaginative possibility of further interpretation and re-imagination. What about thematic conceptions of evil as outside the human and the ensuing implication that one's sex defines one's humanity? What is implied/assumed about toxic masculinity? What about implications that Lady Macbeth does not want to be a man, but cannot *imagine* how she could be a woman and behave the way she does? How many self-identified women have yearned to do away with their "womanness" but didn't seek to "be a man"? If you are the sex which is not one, an existence in the margins outside full humanity allows and demands a plethora of subject positions that move far beyond the woman/man binary, subject positions open for interpretation with the figurative phrase "unsex me here" but rendered impossible through the translation.

We continue to conceive of gender and bodies in ways that perpetuate an oversimplified sexual dimorphism of humans and assert that if one is not a woman then one could only ever be a man. This does not seem like an irrational choice; the "objective reality," according to popular belief, despite the phenomenal work of books like Cordelia Fine's *Delusions of Gender*, is that there is a penis and a vagina and, therefore, there is a man and there is a woman. This argument is cissexist, reductive, and wholly untrue for people who are intersex, trans, and living outside of the gender binary, and the power of "objective reality" as it takes form through the discursive fields of medicine, the economy, and the legal system becomes a form of violence as individuals use their perception to justify denying others their humanity. Lady Macbeth, in one agonizing plea to the spirits, gives the battle cry of every human being who was told they were not one.

Gerald Smallberg, in his essay "Bias is the Nose for the Story," states that "our perceptions are crucial in apprehending truth. However, we do not apprehend objective reality. . . . Bias is an intuition, sensitivity, receptiveness which acts as a lens or filter on all our perceptions."<sup>34</sup> Shakespeare may have intended to present a female character begging to be a man; I don't care. Language is not a stable geography and I am not nearly as interested in what Shakespeare intended as what he wrote—and what he wrote changes with time. We are currently pursuing and generating language to describe realities and gender identities that are more complicated than we have conception for—the myth of the gender binary has not been recently rewritten—and the line "unsex me here" still—four hundred years later and after reams of scholarship—holds a bounty of conceptions waiting to be unfurled. Every meaning made generates the possibility of rewriting the tired gender binary. It cannot undo the center, but close reading to generate possibilities rather than only explicate what was possible during a specific historical

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moment means the rewriting of the center. This makes Shakespeare tangible and alive. This uses close reading to explore not bound.

Obviously the editors of *No Fear Shakespeare* close read; they made meaning of Shakespeare within the boundaries and limits of what the myth of gender presented as the most “right” answer. Barthes argues that “what the world supplies to myth is an historical reality . . . and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality” and that “a conjuring trick has taken place; [myth] has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature.”<sup>35</sup> A history of patriarchy written within the limits of misogyny and preserved through the filter of sexism makes the *No Fear Shakespeare* “translation” of “unsex me here” inevitable because it is *logical*. “Myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear.”<sup>36</sup> And the discourse of medical science, the objective reality of genitalia, and the fundamental uncertainty of subjectivity means gender may be accepted as performative, but is not actually being undone.

Smallberg says that “bias is the thumb experience puts on the scale” and that “Our brains evolved having to make the right bet with limited information.”<sup>37</sup> I do not think people are evil or that they aren’t willing to expand their understanding of “human;” power is grasped, maintained, and enforced in our society through the wielding of authoritative discourse. Our myths feed signification which generates our perceptions of reality; the most powerful myths are still tied to positivism and objectivity even when the scientific understandings of both positivistic pursuit and objectivity are emptied out and distorted through the misunderstood trumpeting of “bias” and perversions of the uncertainty principle to undermine logical thinking. Myth is true because it is effective, not because it is factual; we rewrote the myth of knowledge to demand certainty as evidence of truth and forgot that people can make themselves uncertain about everything. In the absence of a mechanism for logically understanding uncertainty the causal, systematic argument falls not because of external invasion but is betrayed by the invasion from within. Our own significations are used against us because you can’t prove words—they become real when they make meaning. Furthermore, until recent strides in the fields of neuroscience and psychology the only evidence of subjectivity was words used to describe it which made it easy to disregard the arguments of the margins. That centuries of words about gender are being proven “right” through experimental science does not seem to be getting the headline it deserves—almost like there is something effective at work we want to believe more than factual information.

Smallberg finishes his essay saying,

Truth needs continually to be validated against all evidence, which challenges it fairly and honestly. . . . Like the words in a multi-dimensional crossword puzzle, it has to fit together with all the pieces already in place. The better and more elaborate the fit, the more certain the truth.<sup>38</sup>

It’s a well stated point, but even here lurks a Trojan horse: whose challenge is fair and honest? Subjectivity remains the enemy of objectivity because the truth must

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be precise and steadfast, but postmodernism made the case for why truth is uncertain—truth is a moving target. This has been accepted and subsumed into the myth not, ultimately, for revolution of thought, but as justification for false equivalencies. Adrienne Rich told us “the personal is always political” because to have a vagina meant inhabiting a body everyone else got a say in, but the experience of that body never offered qualification to speak about it. Judith Butler argued for the necessity of considering what constituted a “livable world” because the answer to that question was dependent upon the subjective experiences and needs of individuals and communities. There is ample evidence subjectivity must not be reasoned out and that when we try it is inevitably in support of the system.

Culturally, our linguistic needs have surpassed what truths our discourses allow access to; it is not only about seeing or doing something new, but finding, creating, or repurposing signifiers for what is already there. The deconstruction and analysis of text is a key player in rewriting myths of gender and power and opening up space for more people to live freely and safely. It is this connection between what is real, what is possible, and what is effective that erodes attempts to remythologize gender and rewrite what makes a “real human.” But it is also through language we recognize and articulate our limits as well as push against them. Whether through words, art, music, or numbers we create systems of signification that allow us to understand what we perceive, interact with that perception, and then affect it. The intuition Frye blithely dismisses as random is actually the bias of subjective experience alerting us to moments our objective perception is off. Recognizing that means asking more questions, new questions, and hammering at those perceptions until we carve new, better, more, or previously unimagined significations. Like what it could mean to be unsexed from gender and/or body. Or what the mathematics of uncertainty would be. Or how time can bend.

It is true subjectivity does not function in a revolutionary manner through any inevitable means; subjectivity can alert us to a myth we’ve outgrown, but our only means of analysis, exploration and theorizing next steps exist within those structures generated by myths and the system resists direct remythologization—whatever replaces the old myth must be as *effective* as the previous one not simply factual. In writing unreal experiences into language many new significations of gender perpetuate the myth of gender even as they attempt to rewrite them. The binaries of gender and the body are failing trans people, intersex people, queer people—they’re failing people, but as thrilling as many conversations happening in the wild west of the internet about these topics are, much of what masquerades as revolution concerning these topics is, in actuality, in support of the institution. To say “I am not a woman” is not the same thing as saying “I am a man,” and to say “I am a woman because I like feminine things” only makes sense as it arises from unexamined cultural structures that demand notions of gender and the body remain built on a binary foundation. The plethora of terms dominating identity politics are exciting—pangender, agender, bigender, demi-sexual, pansexual, and so forth—but what do any of these terms mean outside the Saussurean definitions that demand we understand “pangender” as it exists in dialect and difference with “feminine” gender and “masculine” gender? And if, as so many of us have argued

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over the last century *there is no such thing* as feminine or masculine gender then what *is* pangender? We keep looking for answers, but every definition we construct is making meaning from the myth of gender.

This is similar to the problem of No Fear Shakespeare. It is not enough to say No Fear Shakespeare is a “bad” edition because it simplifies Shakespeare; it is the only thing that is real and tangible to the sixth grader and that tangibility is necessary for meaning-making and any subsequent subjective explorations. But No Fear Shakespeare is paradoxically perpetuating the “reality” of the gender binary that very same sixth grader will someday critique with her “budding feminist identity.”<sup>39</sup> Myth holds the structures together. The certainty of knowing, which regenerates the myth which generated it, makes No Fear Shakespeare necessary for a great many young readers for whom explication of Shakespeare is impossible. But, in order to legitimately remove the need for No Fear Shakespeare an overhaul of the educational system—and myths of knowledge along with who knows what else—would have to be undertaken. This is work no single individual could undertake nor is there any guarantee that such a dismantling of No Fear Shakespeare would actually remythologize; it is equally possible a vacuum would be created and filled by a new, equally bounded text that could be read with certainty, and would regenerate certainty in turn.

This is why uncertainty is so necessary; whatever new conceptions of gender and identity are signified or constructed, either they will not feel “real” and “natural” as the myth goes through metamorphosis, or they will strike us as “new” and heretofore unimagined—new territory bringing its own kind of uncertainty with it. Being able to think through this uncertainty, “tolerate the ambiguity” as Berthoff says is necessary; one way to do this might be engaging in the work of Derrida’s creative tinkering through the writing of new stories and using a familiar methodology like close reading for unfamiliar means. We might begin by being critical of why we know what we know—this can be pursued by not requiring the certainty of an answer but by pushing for the justification of meaning. Meaning is uncertain—the rock star Dave Grohl summed it up when he said, “You can sing a song to 85,000 people and they’ll sing it back for 85,000 different reasons.”<sup>40</sup> The goal is not to streamline or simplify those reasons, but to develop (or in the case of close reading redevelop) better techniques for its analysis. Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh in *The Philosophy of Derrida* argue that “the impossible is Derrida’s guiding ideal. Just because we cannot shake off our limits does not mean we should not try to push against those limits.”<sup>41</sup> Justifying meaning is the exploration of what made it, not the proving of its certainty.

There is the uncertainty that comes with knowing we don’t have an answer or that our answer may change, but we still maintain the comforting promise there *is* an answer. And then there is the uncertainty that comes with knowing we have the best answer for the moment, but this moment will change and, thus, so must our answer. This second uncertainty requires malleability and movement, a continual remythologization rather than embrace and sublimation into existing power. This is what Derrida explicates, I think, and it is this second uncertainty the humanities, in particular, are best suited to problematize and help us learn to think about.

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I am agitating—alongside many others who came before me—for an epistemological shift in how we conceive of the pursuit of knowledge and, specifically, what evidence means within the realm of literary studies. Close reading is far too often wielded by authoritative discourse as a means of maintaining and policing boundaries, and clinging to that authority with no emphasis on the necessary evolution of its methods to fit shifting discursive needs denies the revolutionary power inherent in all education. The requirement that students produce answers rather than learn to ask questions and suppress their subjective intuition rather than learn to recognize and harness it is the pressure of the system demanding we uphold it, promising only madness will come with change.

The humanities have been at a disadvantage for some time; mathematics is considered the supreme system of signification and, indeed, Shakespeare never put anyone literally on the moon. Because sometimes the math works, even if we don't always know why, science is able to pursue questions and theorize in wildly exciting ways all while not knowing how it will work out in the end. This intersection of imagination, knowledge, and experimentation has led to amazing discoveries and tremendous failures. The humanities, by contrast, have been under attack to produce quantifiable products that benefit society as defined by capitalistic ideologies of benefit: a.k.a. profit. We are not afforded the opportunity to explore the cosmos of our imaginations because our products are less tangible and certainly less quantifiable. Because of this we've been sold the lie there is no benefit.

But while the imprecision and uncertainty of Shakespeare has been misread as difficulty indicative of product-value and used to justify the humanities as tangible evidence of "high culture," his works hold real revolutionary benefits and are still an exciting location for exploration. Shakespeare is a difficult read because his language is old and out-of-touch. And that's okay. But sometimes Shakespeare—like all other storytellers and generators of language—provides conceptual metaphors that allow readers to alter their perception of objective reality. And critics, making meaning out of Shakespeare's text by reading it closely, can shape and reshape these subjective meanings until they best fit the crossword puzzle of a given moment. There is nothing unique to Shakespeare in this process, nothing essential, but Shakespeare has been preserved and mythologized in Western, and increasingly globalized, society; this means that making and re-making meaning through Shakespeare constantly enables a better understanding of who we are by re-examining not only who we used to be, but also who we have willingly crafted ourselves into being. And then, through theories like presentism, queer studies, gender studies, and post-colonialism, we can push against our limits. Having articulated where we are, we can now explore where we aren't.

Shakespeare borrowed characters, plots, and narratives from those that came before him and he has been constituted and reconstituted in the centuries following his death. The undeniable reality is that Shakespeare continues to be considered necessary and relevant because we view "Shakespeare" as some sort of cultural authority, not because he is the best or only author to wrestle with such themes as identity, fate, love, and hate. Thirty-five years ago Eagleton stated in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction* that

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becoming certificated by the state as proficient in literary studies is a matter of being able to talk and write in certain ways. . . . You can think or believe what you want, as long as you can speak this particular language. . . . It is just that certain meanings and positions will not be articulable within it.<sup>42</sup>

The intersection of the “science” of close reading and the myths of Shakespeare become a deadly combo. This notion of Shakespeare’s *rightness* means students are rarely empowered to make meaning with Shakespeare and critics must consistently produce something “new”—a product—rather than engage in conversation for (re)discovery that might serve revolutionary praxis. Instead as educators, we should heed the call: don’t tell me why everything I know is wrong—first tell me why everything I thought was right and how I can go from that into uncertainty until I find the next set of questions. Why do we think what we think? How has the dark energy of myth affected the probability of our answers before we even asked the questions? This work can be done by close reading the self (I knew I could work Stanley Fish in here) but also by close reading culture. Or by close reading science. It is not the sacrifice of logic and rigor but the recognition that we must sometimes go outside our box in order to articulate it.

There is work to be done in the analysis of systems of power as they continue to be perpetuated through close reading and Shakespeare. Close reading and its position as a rigorous tool, its history as it is attached to New Criticism, and its continued use and misuse in conservative supremacist academic practices, is a moment where systemic power—mythically understood as most “true” and therefore justified, believable, and trustworthy—takes form in language. Eagleton states, “Whole social ideologies may be implicit in an apparently neutral critical method; and unless studying such methods takes account of this, it is likely to result in little more than servility to the institution itself.”<sup>43</sup> We all agree the destructive authoritative power of social norms is dangerous and subject positions are always more loaded than they appear, but if we can also agree that all language—whether it be what we use to examine other language or the language being examined—exists in a subjective temporal position where meaning is never static, then we can remythologize that power into something more ethical. One starting point is realizing it is not possible, no matter how carefully we historicize, to achieve an “authentic” reading of a text; it is not even possible within our own current historical moment to read a text the same way twice. Or, if it is possible, we should seriously consider if it’s desirable.

If we are unafraid to close read not only what is buried in the text but also what is written out of it, then wherever we begin that process—Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, or Wonder Woman—we have the possibility to reconfigure the praxis of literary criticism and its power to fight for very real, and very necessary change. Close reading can be analyzed as one more tool used by and for a subjective mind. The necessity of thinking abstractly, of pursuing uncertainty



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and learning how to think when we don't know the answer is a part of the epistemological puzzle that has been degraded and under attack for far too long.

I am no longer interested in justifying the humanities. I am far more interested in wielding them.

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