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Close Reading Shakespeare: An Introduction

PETER PAROLIN and PHYLLIS RACKIN

When Phyllis first proposed a Shakespeare Association seminar on close reading, she wasn't sure it would be accepted, because although many of us continue to employ close reading in our undergraduate courses, close readings of literary texts have long fallen out of favor as subjects for academic publication. Nonetheless, the proposal was accepted, and the seminar proved so popular that a second session, which Peter agreed to lead, was required, and many applicants still had to be turned away.

This is not to say that old-fashioned close reading, as it was practiced at the middle of the last century, has come back into favor as the featured subject of academic writing. Back in the 1950s the American academy looked very different from the way it looks today, and, not surprisingly, so did the intellectual interests and political allegiances of its members. Close reading was a good, safe methodology for a conservative political climate; and it's probably no coincidence that the leading advocates of close reading were white Southern men, most of them deeply devoted to what they thought of as traditional values, religious, social, and political. At its best, close reading was an attempt to demonstrate the humane value of literary study in what its proponents regarded as an increasingly fragmented, mechanistic, and inhumane world.¹ Poetry, they argued, was a unique mode of discourse, which required and rewarded a method of reading different in kind from the way we process other forms of writing, such as newspapers or scientific textbooks, simply to acquire the information they communicate. At its worst, the methodology they proposed tended to insulate the literary text from its necessary context in human life. Consideration of a writer's biography was unnecessary, perhaps even misleading, because it could contaminate a close reading by what was famously described as "The Intentional Fallacy." A companion doctrine, called "The Affective Fallacy" warned against focusing on reader response.² The kind of close reading that was taught in the 1950s attempted to limit the subject of literary analysis to the actual words on the page, without any regard to what were called "extraliterary" considerations. One popular poetry anthology designed for introductory classes actually suppressed the names of the authors, as well as the dates when the poems were written.³

Needless to say, there are no signs that this old New Criticism is finding a new home at the Shakespeare Association. Probably the main reason for the surprisingly enthusiastic response to the offering of a seminar devoted to close reading is that time is short, so most members of the Association try to find a seminar to which they can submit papers based on scholarly projects in which they

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are already involved. And since close reading remains an essential tool for literary analysis, the topic lent itself to the maximum variety of projects. As Jean Peterson astutely observed in her paper, “The Future of (Close) Reading,” a student of literature can no more dispense with close reading than a carpenter can build without hammers and nails. Still, as the papers for our seminars emerged, they perhaps unexpectedly presented a powerful rationale beyond methodological flexibility. Almost to a one, the papers insisted on ongoing relevance for close reading, and revealed a theoretical urgency that drives its practitioners. Peterson reminded us that despite the conservative ways close reading was once practiced, the approach can yield progressive results. We certainly found that the commitment to progressive and disruptive readings motivated the close reading of many of our contributors.⁴ Karen Cunningham pointed out the potentially generative power in every act of close reading, observing that when we close read Shakespeare to explore certain kinds of issues (say, religion) and not others (in Cunningham’s case, law), we end up producing, for better or worse, the very Shakespeare that we then proceed to close read. Likewise, Clare Kinney noted that in the preparation of a text, “An editor close reads so that others may close read in their turn.” Nowadays, we no longer chase the chimera of a neutral close reading that objectively reveals the smooth, coherent surface of the well-wrought urn; instead, our active close reading locates and frets away at the problem spots. Jessica McCall actively advocated a model of close reading that explicitly disrupts the coherences that govern our thinking, challenging us instead to use close reading to imagine alternative ways of knowing the world and constitutive categories like gender and power.

In the case of our seminar, then, the hammers and nails Peterson invoked constructed an impressive variety of structures, most of them inconceivable in the 1950’s. The mid-twentieth-century turn to close reading was in large part a rebellion against the older historical criticism that had dominated literary studies during the previous half-century; but many of the papers we received, in keeping with current critical interests, focused on historical contexts. Barbara Sebek in fact used the term “historicized close reading” to describe her detailed exploration of the textual networks that link *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Jonson’s *Discoveries* to Anglo-Spanish diplomacy and the global circulation of specialty foodstuffs. Along these same lines, one of our original writers in the 2016 seminar looked at Renaissance texts about horse coursers to elucidate Petruchio’s behavior to Katharine in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Another looked at Renaissance costume books to read *Othello* through the language of clothing. Still another reassessed the influence of Sidney’s *Defence of Poetry* on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

All these papers—and in fact all the papers we received—employed some form of close reading even when they did not address its methodological implications. Some of the writers simply employed close reading as a technique to elucidate features of the texts that interested them, but many examined the methodology itself—its uses and limitations, the occasions when it did and did not seem appropriate, and the areas of research in which more of it could be useful. Whereas the old close reading was designed to examine literary texts, some of our writers used the method to examine non-literary texts, such as law, and non-verbal

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material, such as stage business, costumes, images, and objects. The variety of subjects was impressive, and so was the quality of the papers.

When Will Stockton asked us to choose six for publication in *Early Modern Culture*, we were faced with a true embarrassment of riches; but we finally narrowed our choice down to six papers, which, in addition to their high quality and originality, also exemplified a striking variety of approaches to the topic of close reading. Several papers call attention to areas where more close reading is needed: for Cunningham, this is Shakespeare and the law; for Kinney, it is the work of early modern women dramatists. Kinney's expert close reading of Elizabeth Brackley and Jane Cavendish's *Concealed Fancies* reminds us, too, that close reading carries a political imperative because it bestows literary legitimacy on newly discovered texts, proving them to be not just historical rarities but instead complex artifacts capable of rewarding the kind of sustained attention that close reading confers. Sebek expands the notion of close reading when she uses passages from Ben Jonson's *Timber, or Discoveries* and a speech from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to model a close reading strategy that insists simultaneously on local, contingent meanings and transposable, global meanings, which radiate outward to illuminate larger cultural issues. Cynthia Lewis describes the way she uses close reading in the training of actors, while Peterson argues for its centrality in education. And while Peterson sees close reading as essential training for citizenship in a democracy, McCall warns of the danger that it can become just the opposite if it restricts the meaning of a text to a tightly bounded authoritative interpretation. All of our contributors stressed the power of close reading as an exploratory methodology that, by paying scrupulous attention to detail, draws attention to textual contradictions, incompleteness, and incoherence. These stumbling blocks then demand complex thinking and smart interpretation as scholars must consider the significance of the ripples that disrupt the surface of textual meaning: how do the ripples problematize the relationship between syntax and meaning, or bring into focus relevant but previously unnoticed contexts, or throw into question the very construction of knowledge itself? McCall held that when we as scholars use close reading to reveal textual perplexities, we move from certainties to questions, from policing meaning to generating new ways of thinking capable of changing the world.

As this brief sampling makes clear, the practice of close reading is still flourishing, an essential instrument in a variety of scholarly projects that would not have been dreamed of by its original practitioners. For them, poetry was a unique mode of discourse that demanded a unique mode of reading. But, as Cunningham convincingly demonstrates, close reading is also a powerful instrument for exploring the embeddedness of literary texts in what have customarily been regarded as alien discursive fields. Close reading also retains its central role in our teaching, even though both the methods and the aims of our pedagogy have greatly changed. If close reading is sometimes still regarded as the tool that helps us understand a stable textual object neutrally, the writers of these papers show that it is something more exciting and potentially more powerful. They show how it can identify surprising contexts for the texts we study, contexts that change the questions we ask and the answers we find: it puts different texts

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and authors, the local and the global, the stage and the page, the personal and the political, in conversation; it raises important questions; and it can reveal startling connections between seemingly disparate discursive fields. These papers also show how close reading inevitably brings our own commitments to bear in exploring worlds that are necessarily ideologically inflected and how it helps us to see the cultural workings of ideology, revealing what is harmful and limiting about certain types of narratives and certain patterns of thought, speech, and identification. It can stimulate us, as ethical critics, to imagine alternatives to toxic ways of thinking. As McCall writes, let's not just defend the humanities, let's wield them. In today's cultural and especially political climate, we see all kinds of good that close reading can do in helping us wield the humanities.

Notes

1. A good example of close reading at its best, which also contains a rationale for the method, is Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947). For a good sympathetic account of the New Criticism, see Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

2. Both "The Affective Fallacy" and "The Intentional Fallacy" were written by W.K. Wimsatt Jr. and M.C. Beardsley and published in *The Sewanee Review*. "The Intentional Fallacy" was published in 54.3 (July-September 1946): 468-488, and "The Affective Fallacy" in 57.1 (Winter 1949): 31-55.

3. The anthology was Wright Thomas and Stuart Gerry Brown, *Reading Poems: An Introduction to Critical Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

4. In "The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading," *Profession* (2007): 181-186, Jane Gallop notes there was always a progressive potential in close reading, even in the early days. Running counter to the elitist prerequisites of old historicism, close reading as exemplified by the New Criticism "was, at least in the classroom, a great leveler of cultural capital" (184). Gallop calls close reading an antiauthoritarian pedagogy because, practicing it, "students had to encounter the text directly and produce their own knowledge" (185).

Peter Parolin is Associate Professor and Head of English at the University of Wyoming. He coedited *Women Players in England, 1500-1660: Beyond the 'All Male Stage'* (2005) with Pamela Allen Brown and has published essays in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Shakespeare Studies*, and *Renaissance Quarterly*.

Phyllis Rackin, Professor of English Emerita at the University of Pennsylvania, is a former President of the Shakespeare Association of America. She wrote her dissertation on the New Criticism under the direction of Murray Krieger, but most of her subsequent publications have been devoted to Shakespeare and related subjects. Her books include *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Cornell 1990); *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (Routledge, 1997), which she wrote in collaboration with Jean E. Howard; and *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford, 2005).