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Dealing with critics

One-minute summary – It is now time for you to decide what you want to do about the critics. Most introductory level courses will not expect you to deal with secondary critical material in depth. But if you can utilise criticism you will demonstrate an ability to integrate your own ideas with recognised wider issues. This can only have a beneficial effect on your grades, provided that you manage it appropriately. This chapter will introduce you to the major critical movements and provide you with ideas for further reading, similar to the manner adopted in chapter seven. There will be sections on:

- Managing critics
- Liberal Humanism
- Structuralism, Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism
- Psychoanalysis
- Feminisms and Gender
- New Historicism
- Cultural Materialism
- Performance
- Postmodernism and Post-Colonial Theory

Managing critics

The more intensive and advanced your engagement with Shakespeare, the more you will be expected to deal with criticism. Once again, this means that you will have to

perform a balancing act. You will need to decide for yourself how much time and effort you can afford to devote to secondary material. The best basis on which to make this decision is cost effectiveness: how much effort will be needed to ensure a decent return on the investment of time and energy? If Shakespeare forms only a small part of your study, then by all means avoid the critics. If you feel the need to engage a little bit, then you will need to know at least the main positions adopted by different types of commentator. But if you wish to investigate their works in detail, you will have to learn how to distinguish between different viewpoints, as well as how to integrate them into your own work.

Basically, there are three responses to critics. First of all, there are those with whom you completely disagree. There are those with whom you agree. And then there are those you find useful, but only in a partial or limited manner. You then have to work out how to include material into your own written work. The easiest way is by means of reference. This is a common technique in exam situations, and also when you wish to characterise a writer's position without necessarily going to all the trouble of quoting from it. In such a case you would summarise the main points, and then note them in your references. Always remember to do this – you don't want to be accused of passing off someone else's work as your own.

But how do you make quotations work for you? You need to make sure that you integrate them fully into your own argument. The best way to do this is to use linking sentences before and after the quotation. These sentences mean nothing in and of themselves, but they join the quotations to your own text. They also subtly signal to your reader that not only have you understood this critic, but that you have found a quotation and you are using it effectively to supplement your own discussion.

You might be quoting a passage from a critic with whom you disagree. You would write a sentence introducing the quotation, then quote, and then you would link it more fully with your own argument. Here is an example:

In his book (title) critic (name) discusses the Balcony Scene in *Romeo and Juliet* (II.ii) as follows:

Quote

However, this fails to take into account the performance circumstances of the Renaissance platform stage. Rather than follow this account, it is more fruitful to continue my argument...

You will notice that the linking sentences do not advance your argument. But they make sure that the quotation works for you. You want to avoid a situation in which you appear to be quoting merely for the sake of it, because you happen to have found a useful critical passage. Make the critics work for you!

Liberal Humanism

One thing you must remember is that all critics have an agenda, especially when they say they do not. One of the purposes of this chapter is to give you an idea of the different groups of critical approaches. This will help you to identify the kinds of interests of the various critics you will come across. You do not want to quote two critics positively, only to have marks deducted because you have not noticed that they violently disagree with each other.

The best group to start off with is that usually labelled as “Liberal Humanist”. These are critics whose work is often quoted approvingly if only because they are very traditional in their approach. You may already have come across some of them. You will find them using terms such as “human nature”, “timeless truths”, “the great genius of Shakespeare” and so on. They believe that Shakespeare’s plays embody the imagination of the world’s greatest literary figure, and that we can gain access to great

truths about the human condition as a result. Any historical specifics are considered purely secondary to these transcendent insights. Representative texts include:

- ❖ Jonathan Bate: *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997).
- ❖ E.M.W. Tillyard: *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Penguin Classics, 1991).
- ❖ Stanley Wells: *Shakespeare: A Dramatic Life* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994).

Structuralism, Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism

As a critical movement, Structuralism is most often associated with Linguistics and Anthropology. However, it did have an effect on literary studies because of links with a group of critics known as the Russian Formalists. One of these, Roman Jakobson, became a major figure in Linguistics, and also published literary criticism. Historically, it could be argued that Structuralism emerges as part of the scientific mood of the later nineteenth century, in which many other disciplines have their root. It is therefore the counterpart in language studies of sociology and psychology.

Jakobson left Russia in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution and the ensuing Civil War. He united the work of the Formalists with the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and corresponded closely with the founder of Structural Anthropology, Claude Levi-Strauss. Eventually this gave rise to the theories of Narratology in the 1960s, which were mostly concerned with the short story and the novel.

Structuralism was therefore not closely involved with Shakespeare studies, although Jakobson did produce a detailed analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 in collaboration. However, the reaction against Structuralism in the 1960s has produced two major movements in Literary Studies, namely Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism. Jacques Derrida is crucial for the former, and Roland Barthes for the

latter. These movements are not the same thing, and although this is not a book on Literary Theory, you still need to have some idea of how they relate to one another.

Many more recent critics have been influenced by the successors to Structuralism, especially in terms of their interests in how language works, and in the stylistics of their own writing. This is extremely difficult material in its own right, and critics who utilise the various techniques associated can be very “literary” in the styles they adopt in their analytical writing. As a result, however, their work can be liberating rather than frustrating. The emphasis on how language operates could well be something you might find useful and important for your own work. Here are some references to get you started:

- ❖ Catherine Belsey: “Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in the comedies”, in John Drakakis ed.: *Alternative Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 1996, p.166ff).
- ❖ Terence Hawkes: *Meaning By Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- ❖ R. Jakobson and L.G. Jones: *Shakespeare’s Verbal Art in Th’Expense of Spirit* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970).

Psychoanalysis

In a manner similar to Liberal Humanism, criticism influenced by Psychoanalysis is also interested in what it sees as fundamental human truths. However, in this case the truths are those inherent to the human psyche itself, and literary texts are read and analysed for the insight they give both into the author’s mind and into the way that the human mind operates in general, in accordance with Freudian theory. Later psychoanalytical work draws on Jacques Lacan’s re-interpretation of Freud’s ideas, and is heavily influenced by an approach similar to structuralism. As with some post-

structuralist work, you will have to make yourself acquainted with the basic tenets of psychoanalytical theory in order to be able to follow the Shakespearean criticism.

Here are some titles:

- ❖ Janet Adelman: *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
- ❖ Murray M. Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn eds: *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

Feminisms and Gender

There are many different kinds of feminist criticism (hence the plural in this section's title). As far as Shakespeare Studies is concerned, they range from an interest in female characters in the plays to analyses of gender roles. Also, feminist critics and gender theorists are very open to influences from groups such as those already discussed – you will probably have noticed already that some of the critics mentioned in previous sections are women, or are interested in gender issues. As with other suggestions in this chapter, the following list should give you a good place to start:

- ❖ Deborah E. Barker and Ivo Kamps eds: *Shakespeare and Gender: A History* (London: Verso, 1995).
- ❖ Juliet Dusinberre: *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (London: Macmillan, 1996).
- ❖ Lorna Hutson: *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1994).

New Historicism

This is a group of contemporary American critics. They have been heavily influenced by the French cultural theorist Michel Foucault via Anthropology. Their main interest is in the interplay of state power and cultural forms. Many of them see Shakespearean drama as reinforcing the norm, and their ideas are often couched in terms of a debate over subversion of dominant forms and the containment of these ideas. Examples include:

- ❖ Stephen J. Greenblatt: *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992).
- ❖ Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor eds: *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987).
- ❖ Leonard Tennenhouse: *Power On Display* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986).

Cultural Materialism

Often confused with the American New Historicists, this is a group of British academics whose predecessor was the influential left wing critic Raymond Williams. Their interest differs from that of the Americans in that they argue for a more complex analysis of texts that goes beyond the axis of subversion versus containment. They are also acutely aware of the differences between Shakespeare's times and our own, and thus are explicitly engaged in questions of historicity, interpretation and appropriation. Some sample texts would be:

- ❖ Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield eds: *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

- ❖ Graham Holderness ed: *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
- ❖ Ivo Kamps ed: *Materialist Shakespeare: A History* (London: Verso, 1995).

Performance

There are various aspects to Performance Studies as they appertain to Shakespeare. Plenty of material exists on modern performances of the plays, but there is not so much on the conditions of contemporary Renaissance performances. This last subject can be further subdivided into critics who try to imagine the actual practices of the Renaissance stage, and those who produce work on the stage culture that is almost sociological. Here are some recommended texts:

- ❖ Andrew Gurr: *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- ❖ Dennis Kennedy: *Looking At Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- ❖ Robert Weimann: *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
- ❖ W.B. Worthen: *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Postmodernism and Post-Colonial Theory

Postmodernism is not the same as post-structuralist. It is an artistic movement that has arisen from a dissatisfaction with the monolithic forms associated with modernism. It takes the logic of reference beyond that of modernism, extending it to

all areas of cultural production instead of only the elite. It has been accused of being all surface and no substance. In relation to Shakespeare Studies it has opened up alternative areas of interest from those associated with more traditional viewpoints. The emphasis on alternatives has helped the growth of new modes of analysis such as Post-Colonial Theory. The attempt to re-read Shakespeare plays from previously excluded perspectives has benefited as a result. Of course, that is not to say that only postmodernism has provided such an impetus. The Barker and Hulme essay mentioned below is avowedly materialist, as well as being one of the major Post-Colonial interventions. Here are some texts you might like to try:

- ❖ Francis Barker and Peter Hulme: “Nymphs and reapers heavily vanish: the discursive con-texts of *The Tempest*” in John Drakakis ed: *Alternative Shakespeares* (London: Methuen, 1996).
- ❖ James C. Bulman ed: *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).
- ❖ Ania Loomba and Martin Okrin eds: *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Tutorial

Study tips

1: If you are going into a particular group of critics in depth, try to find out more about them in general so as to give yourself a context for their work on Shakespeare. There are many collections of essays and commentaries on different aspects of criticism. The way that a particular critic is associated with a specific movement is crucial.

2: Some critics are associated with more than one of these groupings. If a critic's name comes up in, say, a collection of Post-Colonial essays as well as in his or her own right as a single author, there may be a linkage that will be useful to you in understanding how the various kinds of criticism relate to one another.

Discussion points

1: Take Liberal Humanism and one of the other kinds of criticism. How does the other one relate to or challenge the more traditional humanist one? This is an extremely important question: there are massive debates going on between various kinds of criticism, and you do not want to be caught out.

2: Take any other two critical groups. Is there a possible connection between them? For example, does a New Historicist approach necessarily preclude a feminist analysis, or could the two be compatible? The more you are able to trace possible connections, the more you put yourself in control of how these groups relate.

Practical assignments

1: If you are trying to read up on secondary critical material for your own work, try comparing them. For example, if you are to write on a specific play, get hold of several essays by different writers. How do they compare? What are they looking for? What are their main interests when analysing the play? If you are able to answer these questions, you will be able to detect the agendas of the critics.

2: Take several of the approaches we have been discussing. Note down how you think each of them would analyse a specific play. Which sections of the text do you think they would find useful for their purposes? Are there areas of common interest, or contradictions?

Practice questions

- 1:** Is a Liberal Humanist interest in timeless truths compatible with a thorough analysis of a Shakespearean text?
- 2:** Would a re-reading of marginalised figures such as Caliban in *The Tempest* by alternative critical approaches change the meaning of the play for you, or do you think that it merely opens up some extra nuances of meaning?
- 3:** Should feminist analysis be confined to discussions of female characters, or should the whole apparatus of gender be analysed more fully?