

Paper Abstracts for Close Reading Seminar, First Session

Phyllis Rackin (University of Pennsylvania)

Rebecca Ann Bach : Reading Shakespeare's Creaturely World Closely

In my paper for the seminar I will look at a number of short segments of Shakespearean text, including a short scene from *Antony and Cleopatra* and a stanza from *The Rape of Lucrece*. I will argue that texts edited in modernity obscure the creaturely world in which they were created. Shakespeare's texts are edited, glossed, and annotated as if they conform to an essential distinction between all humans and all other "animals." As a result, the texts help to create an essential distinction that did not exist when Shakespeare was writing them. Looking closely at creaturely references in the texts reveals the contours of the creaturely world, a world in which the bodies, minds, and sounds of many nonhuman creatures are undeniably present, and the things that creatures make, and that are made from creatures, are always "articulated" with their makers. Finally, I will suggest ways in which texts could be edited, glossed, and annotated to better reveal that world.

Dympna Callaghan: "What Shall Cordelia Speak?": The Politics of Blank Verse

Starting from Cordelia's question in *King Lear*, this paper will examine the relationship between Shakespeare's poetry and early modern ideas about unconstrained, "free" speech at a time when neither eloquence nor plain speaking could secure the right to speak one's mind. I will explore the connection between poetic fluency and the specifically political idea of unfettered speech. I will argue that the technical constraints of Shakespeare's verse paradoxically work not only to authorize freedom of expression but also to question ideological and political restriction.

Kent Cartwright: Rhetorical and Performative Close Reading, with the Example of *Much Ado About Nothing*

At this stage, my paper feels more like a description, a set of concerns, than an argument. My underlying question is, how much is the fate of the Shakespeare profession (and the literary profession) bound up with the fate of close reading? As John Guillory has pointed out, close reading developed at a certain cultural moment. Now reading practices are changing. New media scholars such as Katherine Hayles describe how individuals (e.g. students) today read a webpage vertically as well as horizontally, and Stephen Greenblatt has noted that even his elite students lack an earlier generation's skills in close reading, while they do possess skills in creating and analyzing visual media. As culture changes, as the demographic composition of our student body is reconfigured, as influences such as the Common Core reduce the amount of imaginative literature that high school students read, and as our own profession shifts toward areas of Anglophone, transnational, global, and contemporary literature, how does a reading practice based on values such as allusion and etymology survive? The answers are unclear. Perhaps one approach that we can take now is to "teach the conflicts." My plan (at the moment) is explore conflicts by considering how Joss Whedon's delightful film of *Much Ado About Nothing* addresses some aspects of the text.

Marcia Eppich-Harris: The Trouble with Partial Continuity: Close Reading and *The Hollow Crown*

I would like to focus my attention in this essay on a recent televised production of the second tetralogy, the BBC's 2012 miniseries, *The Hollow Crown*. While the cinematic quality of the series was unequivocally impressive, the failure to closely read and understand the complexity of the plays, historiography, and genealogies and to make use of the intricate details within them, ultimately doomed the series to unevenness, at best, and mediocrity, at worst. In order to produce the histories as a cycle, close reading of the plays, historiography, and genealogies of the nobility is essential if the tetralogical production as a whole is to have integrity. In this sense, *The Hollow Crown* was a missed opportunity, because it lacked a deep dramaturgical understanding of the histories, the characters, and their

relationships. I will analyze some of the problems in the series and discuss how close reading and better dramaturgy would have had an impact on the production of *The Hollow Crown*.

Kirk Hendershott-Kraetzer: Breaking Brains: Six Short Essays Concerning Close Reading

This essay argues that the definition and practice of “close reading” are so widely varied in different academic disciplines and in our society more broadly that the concept has become a free-floating referent: in essence, “close reading” means whatever the person using it at that point thinks, wants or needs it to mean. Beginning with an exploration of some of the causes of undergraduates’ struggles with the practice of close reading in their English courses, the essay reviews the various subjects that critics have closely read, then moves on to examine how close reading is defined by various theorists and practitioners. The essay concludes with an attempt to remediate student (and faculty) difficulties with learning (and teaching) close reading. Individuals teaching close reading ought strongly to consider interrogating and reformulating their pedagogy to ground their practice in the deliberate instruction in the fundamentals of English grammar and syntax in every course they teach; in more deliberate, structured instruction in the component practices of close reading; in explicit instruction on whatever critical or theoretical model(s) the close reading practice is yoked to; and an open acknowledgment and discussion of how different disciplines understand and use the practices of close reading differently.

Maurice Hunt: A Closer Reading of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Sidney’s *The Defence of Poesy*

Quite a few commentators on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have asserted that Shakespeare read Sir Philip Sidney’s *The Defence of Poesy* and that he was either alluding to or drawing upon aspects of it in *A Dream*. Only close reading yielded their argument. But is Sidney’s *Defence* relevant for *A Dream*? And if so, how? And in what senses? A closer close reading of the play—if one can be excused for this awkward phrase—casts doubt on their argument. Finer attention reveals Sidney’s ambiguous attitude in *The Defence* to the Platonic doctrine of the poet’s divine inspiration, which Duke Theseus introduces into the play. And yet, applied at length, this sharply focused attention discovers that the effect of *The Defence* on *A Dream* is more pervasive than critics have claimed, most notably in Oberon’s eloquent reprisal of Plato’s theory.

Clare Kinney: Imaginary transparency: the turn from close reading and its consequences for the editorial mediation of early modern women dramatists

The explosion of scholarship on early modern women’s lyric and drama took place after the displacement of primarily formalist approaches to literary texts by alternative methodologies. As a result, the work of these authors did not enjoy those prefatory decades of close reading that canonical male authors had received—the critical labor that worried away at textual ambiguity and interpretive cruxes (producing, for example, article upon article analyzing tricky poems like Shakespeare’s sonnet 94). My paper will explore some of the consequences of this historical circumstance for editorial projects addressing women dramatists. It will address in particular a phenomenon I call “imaginary transparency” in the mediation of previously unedited works—the foreclosure upon multiplicity and complexity produced by a reluctance to acknowledge and linger over local difficulties, eccentricities and surprises.

Cynthia Lewis: Close Reading

If actors of Shakespeare are going to get the meaning of a play’s dialogue across to an audience, they need to figure out which word(s) in a sentence receive emphasis. Students also need to analyze emphasis in order to understand what they’re reading. Although related to metrical stress (as in *ictus*), emphasis is ultimately something different: it may help determine stress, displace or supersede stress, or involve more emphasis than metrical stress alone. Take, for example, the basically iambic line: *I need a little sunshine in my life*. *Sunshine* appears to be the word with most

emphasis in the line, even though rhythmic stresses fall on syllables in addition to *sun-*. But if an actor said the line with emphasis on *little*, the line's meaning would shift considerably: *just give me a wee bit of sunshine*, it appears to say, *and I'll be okay*. Emphasis on *I*, in addition to changing the meaning of the sentence, would also alter the rhythm, so that the line would begin with a trochee, a metrical inversion: *YOU may not need any sunshine*, the line would imply, *but I do*. Determining the meaning of a line, and thus how to speak it in the theater, involves shuttling back-and-forth among several considerations: a line's rhythm, its emphasis, its content, and its context. When more than one reasonable possibility presents itself, the actor or director must make a choice. Although many theater practitioners labor under the impression that certain rules govern emphasis—for example, that pronouns almost never or rarely receive it—many such rules are bogus and, if followed doggedly, can prevent an actor's delivery of a line from making sense. Close reading, line by line, is the only way to go.

Elizabeth Mathie: Petruchio the Horse-courser: The Labor and Brutality of the Trainer in *The Taming of the Shrew*

In this paper, I use a historically situated figure—the horse-courser—as a context for reading Petruchio's treatment of Katharina in *The Taming of the Shrew*. This context, I argue, demonstrates how references to animal training in the play might code Petruchio's treatment of Katharina as brutal rather than socially acceptable. Petruchio's coding as a horse-courser also highlights an early modern understanding of the role violence played in ostensibly mutual or loving relationships between superiors and trained subordinates. In addition, the horse-courser and his relevance to *The Taming of the Shrew* demonstrates how historical specificity can complicate modern assumptions about what would necessarily be considered ethically acceptable in early modern texts. It is my hope that, in reflecting on this close reading along with the other seminar papers, we might be able to discuss how close reading as a method, paired with a consideration of the historical situatedness of Shakespeare's texts, might be utilized to address topics relevant to modern society despite the apparent textual and historical constraints of both methods.

Bella Mirabella: "Speak of me as I am:" Clothing, Perception, and Character in *Othello*

In this paper I want to examine the use and significance of clothing in *Othello* through a new way of thinking about close reading, not only through the language of words, but also through the language of clothing. How to dress and what to wear were topics of huge concern in the period—from the proliferation of costume books, such as Cesare Vecellio's, to the necessity of clothing in fashioning a self as Baldessare Castiglione recommends, to critiques about fashion and attire from writers such as Philip Stubbes, to the importance of costume in the theater, see Henslowe's *Diary*, to the frequent mention of clothing and practices of attire in drama. Throughout *Othello*, Shakespeare refers to items of clothing, materials, accessories, and practices of attire; he also constructs verbs, adjectives, and metaphors around dressing. One of the major concerns of the play is how to know a person from their external presentation. Looking at *Othello* through the language of clothing, a linguistic and visual meaning system that the audience would have understood, allows a close reading of the conflict between illusion and reality in the play and how a character is constructed and understood.

Jean Peterson "They're showing off." Allusion, close reading, and post-modernity in Hamlets of the 21st Century

I want to explore how *allusion* necessitates extremely close reading. For allusion to work at all as a device, both text and paratext must be lodged in the reader's memory in ways that close reading is very good at providing.

I want to discuss this in a couple of contexts: first, on the special difficulty that allusion-laden literature (such as the kinds we teach) provides in the contemporary classroom. My title line was delivered with impressive side-eye by one student in response to another. That student's exasperated query "But WHY do authors use allusion?" is easy to mock, but its agonized cadence held the ring of a genuine question. What IS the particular mental pleasure offered by allusion? (Are the pleasures of close reading similar?).

These ideas lead me to an examination of some recent stage and film representations of *Hamlet*, and to some patterns of allusion and intertextuality I think worthy of attention.

Jyotsna G. Singh: Surface Reading versus Symptomatic Reading: Reading on the Surface of Act 3, Scene 7, (Gloucester's Blinding scene) in *King Lear*

This paper examines whether different reading strategies as labeled above can produce different meanings in a work. What is the advantage of focusing purely on structure and syntax? Are some strategies more useful in reading against the grain of a passage or a scene? Exploring the differences between the two methodologies, I focus on the possibilities of *Surface Reading* as a mode of reading and interpretation. I approach this as a methodology that does not depend on political or theoretical meta-languages, and *neither* does it simply approximate new criticism with its emphasis on the valorization and even mystification of the formal properties of the text as an artifact. And finally in I draw on the interpretive possibilities of these imperatives (with some inevitable overlap) of surface reading by a briefly examining how one can read Act 3, scene 7 of *King Lear*, a scene in which Gloucester is blinded, and the servant and Cornwall are also killed.

Richard van Oort: Love and Resentment in *Coriolanus*

My paper discusses 5.3 of *Coriolanus*: the so-called "reconciliation" scene in which Coriolanus abandons his revenge after being confronted by his mother, wife, and child. I have a number of questions I wish to ask. Firstly (and most basically), why does Coriolanus abandon his revenge? Secondly, why are the women (Volumnia, Virgilia, Valeria) successful while the men (Cominius, Menenius) are not? Is this an instance of Coriolanus bending (once again) to the indomitable will of his mother? Or, alternatively, is there a deeper spiritual crisis going on inside Coriolanus that makes him more than simply his mother's puppet? How are we, for instance, to understand Virgilia's role in this scene? Or Aufidius's? And what about the boy? Why is he there? What larger symbolic or allegorical significance does he bear (if any)? As far as the larger stake of this reading is concerned, I guess I would say that if I can show that there is some deeper moral conflict going on inside Coriolanus, then this undermines the view (which I think has dominated criticism after Bradley) that there is nothing redemptive about Coriolanus at all and that the play is, as A.P. Rossiter thought, loaded with so many ironies that it turns into a history play.