

ABSTRACTS: SHAKESPEARE AND CLOSE READING, GROUP 2

Seminar Description

Seminar papers can be either close readings of individual plays or theoretical arguments about the methodologies of close reading, the reasons close readings have fallen out of favor, and/or arguments for their continuing value.

Mary Adams, Western Carolina University

“When that I was and a little tiny boy”: Chiasmus and Coming of Age in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*

I'd like to combine two ways of thinking about the comedies *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. Recent studies of Elizabethan epyllia stress the way writers in the 1590s, especially writers connected with the Inns of Court, manipulated Ovidian themes to create *coming-of-age* tales about young men, tales that associated maturity with a triumph over sentimental, or Petrarchan, love for women as well as with a mastery of rhetorical prowess. I read both these plays as beholden to the epyllia tradition, and so I see them as plays about the transformation of boys to men, with Orlando and Orsino as focus. Against this tradition I'd like to study a particular rhetorical trope (or scheme)--chiasmus, which has received renewed attention lately, as scholars have begun to unravel its particular intricacies. Cognitive poetics affords us the chance to examine not only what a figure means but how it means—that is, to understand its central connection to the way a play enacts and creates webs of association. Since the 1970s, rhetoricians have struggled to articulate how rhetoric functions in this way, although almost no one has yet used the language of cognition to talk about chiasmus. So in this paper, I'd like to do some preliminary work at examining how chiasmus, in both its familiar and more complex forms, performs the very transformative function and verbal mastery that is part of the young man's journey to maturity in the epyllia. I argue that chiasmus is particularly appropriate in these plays because it is a way of examining paradoxical notions of identity. These plays celebrated the coming of age of several talented boy actors for whom playing women was the path to citizenship and marriage. Indeed, for one boy, it was a means of marrying into the family of the company's sharers, building a network of men that would advance his career and his fortunes.

Christopher Clary, Emory & Henry College

“Thou map of woe, that thus dost talk in signs’: Close Reading, Body Language, and the Physical Text in *Titus Andronicus*”

This essay explores the intersection of “close reading,” understood a trope staged and enacted by the early modern theatre, and the concept of the textual body. It argues that Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* repeatedly presents Lavinia's body as a text to be collectively, publicly, and closely read across a variety of discursive fields. However, the play also explores the persistent unreadability of Lavinia's textual body once it is violently torn from those same discourses following her rape and mutilation. In particular, I am fascinated by the compulsive failure of

Titus and Marcus to make textual sense of Lavinia's physical self once she no longer signifies as an inviting, erotic, and decorative commodity of family and state.

Karen Cunningham, UCLA

Some Writing about Some Reading about Close Reading

This paper begins with a question: how is it that literary scholarship on law in Shakespeare historically has figured so little in close readings of the plays? Presently there is a proliferation of work on all aspects of the relationship between Shakespeare and the wide swath of legal history and process. Yet older and new editions of the plays adopt the view that Shakespeare's pervasive references to contemporary legal language and questions do not bear importantly on his achievements. When aspects of law do appear in literary readings, they are often assimilated into the broad category "political background." In these views, instead of being the story itself, legal Shakespeare is a marginal element in a presumably more significant tale. To explore this issue, I first rehearse a partial (in both senses) history of some theoretical and ideological underpinnings of close reading (for which I rely heavily on Terry Eagleton), then survey some aspects of the more recent "law and literature" movement. Over time, the separation of law, with all its complexity about human being, from literature in general and Shakespeare in particular, produces characteristics of both the legal and the literary disciplines: a particular version of Shakespeare as a playwright interested only in "these" kinds of things (religion, identity, etc.) and not in those kinds of things (law, legal culture), and a version of law as a marginal or "other" collation of ideas unrelated to popular culture and humanist thought.

Jay Farness, Northern Arizona University

A Scene from a Marriage in *Hamlet* (or, Mousing around in Hamlet's Theater)

This paper reads the dialogue between Player King and Player Queen in *Hamlet* 3 as a refraction of Hamlet's family scene. The play context brings up features of this dialogue that inevitably—and maybe inexplicably—envelop Hamlet's expressed intentions in other motivations (familiar to *Hamlet* criticism) that he doesn't, can't, or won't acknowledge.

Fran Helphinstine, Morehead State University

Close Reading: A Boon to Shakespearean Scholarship

"The critic's job is to uncover these meanings in such a way that people have an 'aha!' moment in which they suddenly agree to the reading, the meanings the critic suggests suddenly come into focus. The standard of success for the close reader who is also a critic is therefore the

enlightenment, insights, and agreement of those who hear or read what he or she has to say." (Barry Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading*. Sage, 2010)

My partial-annotated bibliographic essay traces modifications to the Vanderbilt New Critics' definition of close reading through the decades by theorists and Shakespearean professors, scholars and performers. They have modified how to read the language of the text, how to define "text," and how to assimilate other literary critical approaches. These modifications to how close reading is defined and applied have revealed a much clearer picture of Shakespeare's artistry.

Rob Kendrick, Gustavus Adolphus College

The Fantastic Subject in *Measure for Measure*

In "Transgression and Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*," Jonathon Dollimore observes that characters like Lucio "cheerfully celebrate instinctual desire" as they "simultaneously reify as natural the (in fact) highly *social* relations of exploitation" (*Political Shakespeare* 85). The ambivalence of Lucio, his ability to enjoy the forbidden pleasures of the flesh while parroting the rigid legalism of Angelo's new style of governance, arises from his position between the higher and lower orders of society. This paper explores the functions of such a subject within the political system Shakespeare portrays.

Lucio moves comfortably back and forth from pleasure in Vienna's brothels to military service to the state, yet his ease within distinct social classes does not prevent his exemplary punishment upon Duke Vincentio's return. He is punished, I will argue, for transgressing social boundaries, specifically for his fantasy of the absent duke's character, in effect a version of himself. However, Vienna's very system of rule creates the space for Lucio to speak his mind freely, to articulate his fantasies of Vienna's rule. Lax law enforcement and Vincentio's distaste for mingling with the people allow subjects like Lucio to create their own accounts of the state and state power; moreover, Lucio's social position lets him perceive the "wear" or "trick" of the times and to disport himself accordingly, unlike those below him. Duke Vincentio's new order cannot accommodate free speech by subjects, appropriating the right to speak freely for an exclusive few. With Lucio's marriage to a "punk," the Duke thereby reestablishes social order by enforcing Lucio's descent down the social ladder.

Catherine Loomis, University of New Orleans
Closing in on Gertrude

I would like to offer a close reading of a few lines from *Hamlet*: Hamlet's vicious fantasy of what happens when his mother and Claudius go to bed (3.4.180-188). In particular, I will look at the image of Claudius paddling his damned fingers in Gertrude's neck to ravel the matter out. Close readings of 3.4 often focus on Hamlet's persistent efforts to find in female frailty the source of all the world's ills. Because we can now bring to close reading many decades of work recovering the language and politics of early modern sexuality, I will look at the way these lines raise a complex and disturbing set of images of the female body that echo earlier scenes and are echoed in later ones, restoring to Gertrude some of the power she seems to lose as the plot moves from Belleforest to Q1 to Q2. The lines, whose uncomfortable puns are rarely glossed, emphasize sexual desire trumping maternal obligation, offering a way to re-read Gertrude's role in the kingdom, and Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia.

Jess McCall, Delaware Valley University

Close Reading: The Theory Which is Not One

What's In a Myth? 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" (1). 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" (2).

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. 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. The application of close reading in the realm of myth becomes something of an interpretative pickle. Myth—defined here as generative narrative—does not exist as itself outside of specific iterations. Myth creates, contains, and bounds (in the Foucauldian sense) the imaginative possibilities of our realities.

How do you undertake a structural analysis of something that has no structure and whose structures, when they do form through narratives, only form within the containment of myth itself? Close reading both does and does not present answers: through close reading we can create perverse readings of texts that simply cannot be proven (was Shakespeare Catholic?

Protestant? Gay? Straight? Pan? Bi? Trans?) but challenge and create imaginative possibilities that nonetheless disrupt and even rewrite (in the case of remythologizations) hegemonic discursive boundaries. Anything is possible if we learn to twist language carefully enough. But at some point care and consideration must give way to Peirce's idea of the "contrite fallibilism" because without it no meaning can be made. If my goal, then, is not to provide an interpretation of a text, but to investigate my reality as it is created, bounded, and constrained by that text in its particular discursive position in the hopes of shifting those boundaries—how, where, and why do the techniques and possibilities of close reading provide necessary structure and rigor, and how, where, and why does close reading restrict and render impossible such an exploration?

I will focus on Lady Macbeth's famous speech in 1.5.45-61 as it appears in the "academic" editions of the Norton and Bedford with that same speech as it appears in "translated" form for No Fear Shakespeare. I want to consider not only the differing possibilities of meaning in these "interpretations" of Shakespeare but to also specifically consider how myths of Shakespeare are recreated and reinforced through a growing lack of awareness of close reading and the figurative conventions of language—something driven by modern capitalist practices commodifying education. What presents itself as an "accessible" version of Shakespeare turns out to actually reinforce western supremacist patriarchal myths that stymie possibilities for remythologization because without figurative language, what Eagleton describes as "literariness," meaning becomes more tightly bounded which in turn removes possibilities of understanding. Without this multiplicity of possibility, the New Critic epistemology of close reading as something which provides the "one true meaning" of text reasserts itself. We must close read then, but only as an act of uncertainty to preserve uncertainty—never as a method of asserting authoritative precision or tightly bounding meaning.

M. Stephanie Murray, Carnegie Mellon University

Leontes's Too-Close Reading

The attention Leontes pays to his wife in *The Winter's Tale* is the attention of a close-reader to his text. He identifies specific turns of phrase, of foot, of cheek, and reads in them betrayal and treason. His mis-reading is caused by the very attention he pays, as he isolates those moments from both the immediate context and the larger environment in which they are produced. Misreading the external textual object in this case provides an opportunity for close-reading of the self in this play, as Leontes reveals what he believes about himself and his world in this flawed reading. Leontes misreads Hermione in counterpoint to his own constructed reality, turning the misreading from a facile plot point to an essential aspect of his tragic trajectory.

Anthony Guy Patricia, Concord University

The Interpretation of Cassio's Dream: A Close Queer Reading of *Othello* 3.3.412-434

According to E.A.J. Honigmann, editor of the Arden Third Series edition of *Othello*, “[d]espite the presence of one significant instance of male bonding” in the play, “that of Cassio and Othello, we must beware of making too much of Iago’s *supposed* homosexuality” (51, italics added). Thus Honigmann, not altogether successfully in my opinion, attempts to disassociate *Othello* from both the concept and the reality of homosexuality. However, my purpose with this essay goes beyond using Honigmann as the proverbial straw man with whom to argue; indeed, simply put, Honigmann reads *Othello* in a different way than I, as a gay man, read *Othello*. To that end, I will direct my analytical energies in “The Interpretation of Cassio’s Dream” to a close reading of lines 413–434 in the pivotal Act 3, scene 3 of *Othello*. I am particularly interested in such phrases as: “I lay with Cassio lately;” “So loose of soul;” “would he gripe and wring my hand . . . and then kiss me hard;” “As if he plucked up kisses by the roots / That grew upon my lips;” and “lay his leg o’er my thigh, / And sigh, and kiss.” Whether these utterances are a representation of reality or a total fantasy for Iago does not seem to matter as much as the fact that they all involve what demands to be considered a passionate – as opposed to a platonic, as Honigmann and others argue where *Othello* is concerned – homoerotic connection between two male characters that cannot be so easily dismissed. Thus, following Marjorie Garber (in her essay, “Shakespeare in Slow Motion”), I will focus on the “text of [this part] of the play and what it tells us” and thereby demonstrate how absolutely crucial close reading is when it comes to queering Shakespearean texts like *Othello*.

Barbara Sebek, Colorado State University

Quickly, Archie, and the Citizens’ Wives, OR, How to Talk to an Elephant

This essay is part of a larger project about reimagining topicality: How can close reading serve to navigate between specific/topical reference and broader/longer/more global histories and futures?

The paper juxtaposes two passages, a fragment marginally titled “Hearsay News” from Ben Jonson’s *Timbers, or Discoveries* and a speech of Mistress Quickly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2.2.57-72). It extracts these excerpts from their respective texts in order to trace an intricate set of topical references and to model a historicized close reading strategy that insists simultaneously on “local,” contingent meanings and meanings that are transposable, global, or that otherwise radiate elsewhere, outward, forward. The bulk of the paper unpacks various topical references in Jonson’s “Hearsay News”—a note or snippet of dialogue for a comic play—in order to discern how Jonson satirically rewrites a charged moment in Anglo-Spanish relations—the so-called “Spanish match crisis”—in which a 1623 gift of an elephant to James from Phillip of Spain is transposed into an embassy from the “great Mogul.” Jonson also jabs at Archibald Armstrong, James’s “principal fool of state,” as court entertainer, international traveler, and public figure, mashing him up with Thomas Coryate and even Jonson himself. I unpack a number of other transpositions and condensations imbedded in the passage. I read Mistress Quickly’s speech to Falstaff as a comic play that she invents to lure him into the wives’ revenge scheme. I briefly consider how her “playlet” resonates with tensions between citizens and courtiers, with Tudor court affairs, as well as international epistolary and trade relations. I also lay out some preliminary questions that the juxtaposition of the two passages raises which will be pursued in a later, expanded iteration of the current essay with the goal of creating a

feminist dialogue between Shakespeare's Windsor wives, their hired servant Quickly, Jonson's Archy, his citizens' wives, the Spanish boy interpreter, and maybe even the wine-drinking, talking, Windsor castle-carrying elephant.

Joel Slotkin, Towson University

Reading Muslim Identity in *Othello* and *The Sophy*

This paper will focus on a close reading of Sir John Denham's play *The Sophy* (1642). I will examine how Denham produces a sophisticated representation of emotional subjectivity by manipulating the not-so-sophisticated Muslim stereotypes of the early modern stage. The play's source narrative, Thomas Herbert's *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* (1634), describes how the Persian king Abbas blinded his own son in the mistaken belief that he sought to depose his father. In retaliation, the Prince kills his own daughter, whom both he and his father love — a rather Pyrrhic revenge. The entire story seems tailor-made to reinforce the stereotypical belief that the peoples of the Muslim world were unduly subject to their emotions and violent passions. Denham, however, has his prince, Mirza, spare his daughter at the last minute. In the process, he presents a radically expanded vision of selfhood and a detailed representation of the restraint and release of powerful, destructive emotions. His portrayal of Mirza oscillates between Stoic virtue and child-killing savagery, and the conventionality of the latter option for a Persian character on the early modern stage renders it truly impossible for the characters or the audience to tell whether he will murder his daughter or not. Although Denham's Prince ultimately refrains, Denham uses the dangerous potential of his foreignness to present the inner landscape of the self as a foreign country, what Mirza calls "A strange, and unknowne world" (5.1.12). I will try to place this argument in the context of Shakespeare's treatment of similar themes in *Othello*.

James W. Stone, American University

A Close Reading of Images of Blood in *Julius Caesar*

The essay for SAA New Orleans that follows is an analysis of the antithetical uses of "blood" in the text of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. This reading of blood follows upon an exploration, omitted in my essay for New Orleans, of how festivity presupposes sacrifice. Sacrifice gives rise to festive commemoration and mourning (and to ritualized replay in the *theatrum mundi* / the Globe theatre; see 3.1.111-16). In the Roman calendar of festive holidays, the Lupercalia is the occasion that serves as background and prelude for the assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March. The answer to the initiating question of the play, "Is this a holiday?" (1.1.2), is ambiguous because the dramatic action crosses over and conflates (liminalizes) the Lupercalian carnival day of February 15 with the Ides of March one month later. Spring rites perform the excising of evil and the introduction of fertility in its stead. The Ides of March are both sacred and profane; murdering the god-king is a sacrilege, but a necessary one that ultimately leads to the restoration of fertility (the golden bough) and of the sacred.

Shakespeare's ambiguous use of blood imagery in *Julius Caesar* traces an arc that oscillates between murder and sacrifice. Blood is a key image of contention in the symbolic panoply of Caesar's death. This is my close reading topic for SAA New Orleans.

