

PART XXV

SHAKESPEARE AND THE CRITICS

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To judge from annual bibliographies, a new book on Shakespeare appears roughly every four days. The accumulated print commentary on Shakespeare not only daunts our desire to be instructed but also exceeds our capacity to engage in firsthand evaluation. Although the modern institutions of literary criticism emerged after Shakespeare and partly in response to Shakespeare, the conception of art and artists as those who thrive in a struggle against cultural forgetfulness in which most perish has been active in Shakespearean commentary from the outset. The literary field – the arena of criticism as well as original art – is a scene of struggle to capture and hold the attention of others. One major arena for criticism is schools.

What good does Shakespeare do critics, and what good do critics do Shakespeare? Critics often attach their own activity to a bigger story. One such story involves emancipation: where bondage was, there freedom shall be. Another big story involves truth: where opinion was, there factual argument shall be. A third big story involves conservation: where modern neglect of the values of the past was, there proper respect for their importance shall be, or where attempts to turn humane literary studies into social activism or scientific research were, there a time-honored use of great books to form character and promote wisdom shall be. These families overlap, and not merely because both the emancipation family and the conservation family claim kinship with the truth family.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- “Everyone’s a critic”
- Teachers and critics
- Critics and authorial survival
- Shakespeare on commentary
- Attention spans
- Shakespeare’s survival
- Just pleasure
- Strategies for getting attention
- “What good are critics?”
- Shakespeare, the critics, and attention deficits

245. RHETORIC, FORM, AESTHETICS

Mark David Rasmussen, Centre College, United States

A play or poem by Shakespeare is a verbal artifact, a complex object made out of words. Of course, it is many other things as well – a script, a story, a cultural construct, a piece of philosophy – but its medium is language. The critics surveyed in this chapter seek to understand how it exploits the possibilities of that medium. These critics have pursued three lines of interest: rhetoric, form, and aesthetics. A rhetorical approach to Shakespeare examines the stylistic choices made within a particular passage or work, or within Shakespeare’s oeuvre, whereas a formal approach considers the organizing principles of the work as a whole (its “form”), either in relation to external criteria or as principles evolving from within. Both rhetorical and formal approaches may primarily aim at description, but often they also serve the purpose of aesthetic evaluation, an assessment of Shakespeare’s successes and failures as an artist.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Criticism from the Restoration to Johnson
- Coleridge and organic form
- Shakespeare and New Criticism

- Other twentieth-century approaches
- New Formalism and New Aestheticism

246. PHILOSOPHY, ETHICS, MORALITY

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Many philosophers have been drawn to Shakespeare's work. Within continental philosophy – a tradition that has always conventionally blurred the boundaries between philosophy and literature – Shakespeare has engaged Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and many others. Curiously, Shakespeare's plays remain relatively unrecognized and unremarked within English philosophy. This uneven reception might serve as a warning: Shakespeare might seem to be crucially engaged with central questions concerning cultural and intellectual inheritance, but he is not reducible to them. Applied approaches to the playwright's work that attempt to impose a fixed or unified line of interpretation often founder on the dramatist's open-ended resistance to conceptual control. Shakespeare's plays themselves open onto infinite possibilities even as they continue to remark our place as infinitely finite and situated readers. As such, Shakespeare anticipates many of our continuing moral dilemmas without necessarily resolving them.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Shakespeare's genius
- Shakespeare and the subject of modernity
- Political Shakespeare
- Shakespeare and heteronomous ethics
- Shakespeare and singularity

247. THE LINGUISTIC TURN AND THE CULTURAL TURN

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Two new ideas in the second half of the twentieth century caused scholars in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences to rethink their core disciplinary practices. "The linguistic turn" made them realize how much the specific features of the language they worked within shaped the findings they produced. "The cultural turn" challenged them to consider how their own cultural and political paradigms shaped the questions they asked and the answers they reached. In highly productive ways, these two moments of recognition undermined the widespread positivism that had characterized academia since the Enlightenment. Within the field of literary studies, the revised plot line usually begins with Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, passes through the cultural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the structuralist criticism of Roland Barthes, and then fragments into a wide variety of poststructuralist and deconstructive critical approaches. An alternative story, presented here, starts with Ludwig Wittgenstein.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Wittgenstein and the question of reality outside language
- Schisms and fault lines
- Historicism and theory
- Deconstruction
- Speech-act theory
- Historicizing formalism

248. CHARACTER AND PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM

Julia Reinhard Lupton, University of California Irvine, United States

Aristotle's idea was that tragedy was cathartic: by feeling pity for the hero and by fearing for his safety and well-being, our emotional experience of drama is organized around the predicament of the central character. Yet character can also be a lure, tricking us into assuming too much affinity between ourselves and the protagonist and encouraging us to forgo meaty meanings for the sugar rush of empathy. Yet character can be not only a first step in dramatic appreciation but also a

precision tool for textual analysis if we include within our considerations of character its literary and conventional qualities, the unfolding history of character as a dramatic idea and critical concept, and the long tradition of thinking about character from the point of view of psychology.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Classical character (type, ethos, persona, daemon)
- Classical character in psychoanalysis
- Character in Romantic criticism and psychoanalysis
- Psychoanalysis without characters

249. BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Dympna Callaghan, Syracuse University, United States

All biographical criticism of Shakespeare – from the unfounded proposition that the work was written by the Earl of Oxford to the most meticulous review of every documentary trace – seeks to describe the dynamic interactions between the author, his world, and his work in the hope of in some way accounting for the magnitude of Shakespeare’s achievement. Bardolatry is always lurking. The central problem in biographical criticism of Shakespeare is not so much a dearth of gathered facts (modern archival research has uncovered an abundance of evidence, especially pertaining to property and legal transactions) but rather the thinness of information, outside the plays as well as within them, about Shakespeare *as a person*. In the absence of such material, a chasm opens up between the life and the works that biographer-critics have attempted to bridge in various ways.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- A history of Shakespeare biographies
- Biographical problem
- Controversy in biography
- Shakespeare’s religion
- Shakespeare’s sexuality

250. MATERIALIST AND POLITICAL CRITICISM

Peter Holbrook, University of Queensland, Australia

Why does it seem inevitable for us to see Shakespeare as “political” when for centuries no one else did? A weak response to this problem is to ignore it, asserting instead that what Shakespeare and his peers had to say about politics is a lot less interesting than what we want to say they said. A stronger comeback is to claim that “political” literary criticism brings to light material that before was invisible or dimly perceived. Looked at in this way, political or materialist criticism is not some outré method for studying literature but, like all really significant discussion of art, ultimately a criticism of life itself, part of the perennial struggle over the meaning of human existence.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- “Materialist” criticism
- “Political” criticism
- Shakespeare as a political writer
- Romantic politics
- The centrality of Marx
- Political differences between tragedy and comedy

251. IDENTITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

Evelyn Gajowski, University of Nevada Las Vegas, United States

To be a subject is to be able to speak and to act. Conversely, to be an object is to be silent and passive and thereby to have meaning inscribed on oneself by others. Identity politics turns the tables on traditional liberal humanism, enabling indi-

viduals and groups in texts and cultures heretofore constructed as objects to speak and to act. Theorists and critics writing from positions within identity politics speak the silences on which patriarchal, homophobic, racist, and imperialist cultures, literatures, and criticism have historically depended. Inviting us to acknowledge our embeddedness in the present and to base our critical practices on an active engagement with it, these scholars construct transformative readings of Shakespeare. They focus on the conflict between subjectivity, on the one hand, and patriarchal, heterosexist, racist, and imperialist power structures, on the other.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Feminism
- Queer theory
- Race and postcoloniality
- The problematic of subjectivity

252. PERFORMANCE, PERCEPTION, RECEPTION

James Kearney, University of California Santa Barbara, United States

As with the ghost scene that opens *Hamlet*, Shakespeare frequently contrives scenes in which characters attend to their own senses and sensibilities, and audiences are likewise challenged to question their own assumptions and expectations. Perception has become an increasingly important term in literary studies generally and in Shakespeare studies specifically. There is, of course, no view from nowhere: the literary object or event must be perceived in particular ways, at a particular moment in time, via a particular medium, in a particular environment, by a particular body. Perception in Shakespeare studies has been pursued on three fronts: reception studies, performance, and the impact of changing conceptions of body, mind, and the environment on how Shakespeare's work was and is perceived.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Reception studies
- Text and reader
- Performance and audience
- Phenomena and perception
- The haunted opening of *Hamlet*

253. COGNITION AND AFFECT

Kristine Steenbergh, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Since the late 1990s, two new perspectives have gained ground in Shakespeare criticism. Cognitive criticism analyzes Shakespeare's works as the product of the human brain. Empirical findings from linguistics, computer science, psychology, neuroscience, and the philosophy of mind are used to interpret (the experience of) historical literature. At the same time, the emotional aspects of texts are foregrounded in the wake of what has been labeled an "affective turn" in criticism. The focus in such criticism is not just on the present but on the past. Studies of emotion and cognition throw a new light on such issues as early modern conceptions of the self, the experience of one's relation to the world, the affective work of the theater, and the emotional effect of Shakespeare's plays on the early modern theater audience.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Historical phenomenology
- Emotion and cognition in early modern selfhood
- The affective work of theater
- Emotion and cognition in Shakespeare's audience