

Unit: 25: Shakespeare Criticism and Theory

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Theory relates discourses to self and society and introduces one to new ways of seeing. The word 'theory' comes from the Greek root words *thea* "a view" and *horan* "to see". The Greek noun *theoria* means contemplation, speculation, perception, view, sight, show, spectacle etc. It is a conceptual scheme explaining the operation of metanarratives and is different from 'criticism' which analyses narratives based on evidence from within. It is ambivalently related to the Greek noun *theatron*, 'a place for viewing, theatre', and Greek verb *theorein*, "to consider, speculate, look at". *Theoros* is an oracle—someone who sees and is consulted. Pythagoreans saw theory as a metaphysical contemplative method. For Plato, it was the vision of eternal forms. Aristotle saw it as the goal of human life.

It was Louis Althusser (1918-90) who made theory a way of seeing the operation of ideologies in literature. He argued that 'natural self' is only a bourgeois delusion and that everyone is subjected to ideologies. Human beings produce and get interpellated by ideologies. Michel Foucault (1926-84) showed that the concepts that we regard as 'natural' are social and cultural constructs meant to make us think along dotted lines. Jean-François Lyotard (1924-88) thinks that religious texts, as well as science, are meta-narratives—stories explaining other stories—and meta-narratives condition self and society. Judith Butler (1956-) regards gender behaviours as performative behaviours than biologically-predetermined ones.

This unit looks at how Critical theory transformed Shakespeare Studies and how Shakespeare affected theory. One can see these by analysing his linguistic, theatrical, political and historical texts and contexts, his relations to ideology and society, and history of critical reception. We will look at this by examining Shakespeare and theory, Criticism and theory, Self, Society, and Expressions.

Shakespeare and theory

Traditionalists argue that one has to examine how Shakespeare is used in Theory and not how theory is used in Shakespeare. For them, Shakespeare is 'not of an age, but for all time!'. This pre-theory Shakespeare is understood as a sublime artist who explored the depths of the human mind. He made us recognize how Macbeth, Hamlet, Lear and Othello are simultaneously archetypes and individuals. This gives Shakespeare as many interpretations as he has readers, and gives scope for further re-interpretations. That is why he is neither a pro-Semite nor anti-Semite although he makes us sympathize with the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*. Similarly, he is not an anti-racist although he portrays the fall of a gullible Black Moor living among Whites in *Othello* or an anti-colonialist. Still, he portrays a banished white king living in an island by subjugating its native who tries to rape his daughter in *The Tempest*, or a misogynist although he makes a strong woman tamed by a husband in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Such reading is possible with all his plays, making him as an engaging writer.

Like James Joyce's *Ulysses* character Haines who affirms that "Shakespeare is the happy hunting-ground of all minds that have lost their balance", the application theory on Shakespeare makes one Janus-faced making one see the ingenuity of Shakespeare and the theorist's, and also makes one introspect as "to what extent do the desires of the reader ... produce the meaning attributed to the text?" (Harris 83). Whether theorists act like that or not, the theory does not see Shakespeare innocuous.

Ever since theory became influential in literary studies since the 1980s, it has been trying to see how Shakespeare mirrors the ideological concerns of their immediate circumstances and how they are products of his historical context. It challenged his universality and instead, saw his works mirroring the sexist, racist, royalist, and colonialist views of his immediate society. It argued that his universality was more a product of cultural imperialism imposed through ideological tools.

The theory sees Shakespeare as someone constructed by colonial discourses and educational meta-discourses. Lord Hardinge preferred those well-versed in English literature and Shakespeare, making Shakespeare criticism crucial in colonial days. The *Punch* limerick shows this:

I dreamt last night that Shakespeare's ghost
Sat for a civil service post.
The English paper for that year
Had several questions on *King Lear*,
Which Shakespeare answered very badly
Because he hadn't read his Bradley.

Although such frameworks to understand Shakespeare continue to exist, he is read using the framework of theories derived by non-Shakespeareans in other languages also. The validity of such variant readings, provided by their alternative theoretical positions is a serious concern for a traditional scholarship. Such a view is also resisted by those defending Shakespeare by counter-arguing that he was a proto-feminist, proto-Materialist, proto-psychoanalyst, proto-deconstructionist, proto-post-humanist etc., trying to find everything in Shakespeare. Perhaps it was Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* which first attempted to use theory as a comprehensive model for ordering the literary universe. Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* and Roman Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art* followed in further ordering this chaotic universe.

Theory permits and validates variant readings of Shakespeare. These range from those addressing specific problems to all-encompassing viewpoints. Such pluralistic readings need to get validated as a valid reading can be strong only through its internal logic and textual evidence. Armstrong thinks that this can be found out through certain tests. The test of inclusiveness checks the congruence of the reading against textual details. The test of inter-subjectivity checks if reading gets the approval of other readers since efficacy test is validated by retrospectively applying reading to itself (Armstrong). Valid theoretical readings will have to derive the patterns of its interpretation from within the text itself. Such validation enables a text to overcome the hegemony of political, ideological or philosophical assumptions. Shakespeare is a widely disseminated text which is subjected to pluralistic readings. Therefore, he is used to validating critical theories.

Shakespeare represents the classical order in English literature. New theories find him a favourite guinea pig for testing their hypotheses. Constant reconstitutions of traditional elements and unfamiliar packaging exaggerate even the proliferation of modern critical approaches to Shakespeare. However, these approaches validate themselves in the "cut-throat intellectual bazaar of contending 'critical' schools whose only point is that the critical methods of twenty years ago are too shop-soiled to be put for sale at all" (Baldick 7).

Criticism

Anyone who researches Shakespeare is plagued with the problem of plenty. The amount of attention given to Shakespeare is baffling. Even Shakespeare specialists find publications and seminars on

Shakespeare difficult to manage, and the many detours in the theoretical forays into Shakespearean universe too many. Hemming and Condell promoted the First Folio saying “whatever you do, buy”. Since then, Shakespeare is promoted through several sorts of bardolisation within England and in the colonial empire with the help of imperial machinery and capitalist logic. This has helped him become the touchstone of all literary-critical endeavours.

Shakespeare criticism began even when he was alive. The not-so-positive comments of Robert Green started it all. Criticism turned eulogistic in the First Folio, with the poems like those of Ben Jonson and John Milton (Senior). In the opening elegy “Upon Master William Shakespeare, the Deceased Author and His Poems” in John Benson’s collection of *Poems written by William Shakespeare. Gentleman* (Thomas Cotes, London 1640) Shakespeare’s neighbouring villager Leonald Digges (1588–1635) praises Shakespeare’s characters. He rejects Jonson’s plagiarism and regards the plays of Shakespeare the “untutored genius, born not made,” are “Arte without Art unparalleled as yet”. He thinks that Shakespeare never imitates, and not burdened with Greek and Latin phrases translated “Plagiary-like” as Jonson did (Bloom 254).

The biographies and prefaces of his early editions graduated into textual criticism over the years. His early editions by Rowe (1709, 1714), Pope (1725), Theobald (1733), Hanmer (1744), Warburton (1747), Johnson (1765), Capell (1768), Steevens (1773), Malone (1790) Reed (1803), and Boswell (1821) systematically established his critical appreciation. Rowe added the lists of characters and act-scene divisions. Pope, Theobald, Hanmer, and Warburton concentrated on illustrations. Pope gave time to Shakespeare’s wayward “happy, abundant, and ingenious” linguistic flair which affected the poetic language of the time. Samuel Johnson’s *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* (1745) might look amateurish today. His “Preface” and commentaries which criticised the editions of Pope and Theobald marked the end of the amateur forays into Shakespeare and became the first major piece of Shakespeare criticism.

The nineteenth-century saw remarkable advancement in Shakespeare criticism. Malone added biography, chronology and description of theatre. Isaac Reed (1803) compared all the variant texts to produce his variorum edition. Boswell’s more thorough edition (1821) became the foundation for a modern textual scholarship. The tone and tenor of the critical views on Shakespeare and his works advanced with Arden, Riverside, Oxford, Cambridge, Norton, Pelican, RSC and Folger Shakespeare editions with more detailed editorial texts than Shakespeare’s work itself.

People also started approaching Shakespeare in different ways. Charles Lamb read Shakespeare as someone who exists more on the page than on the stage. The success of the Lambs’ *Tales from Shakespeare* (1809) emboldened him to wonder if Shakespeare’s tragedies were fit for the stage at all. He argued that his tragedies become “another thing” on stage and claimed that

Why, nine parts in ten of what Hamlet does, are transactions between himself and his moral sense, they are the effusions of his solitary musings, which he retires to holes and corners and the most sequestered parts of the palace to pour forth; or rather, they are the silent meditations with which his bosom is bursting, reduced to words for the sake of the reader, who must else remain ignorant of what is passing there. (Lamb)

Shakespearean eulogist AC Bradley could still point out his “real defects” like (a) stringing together many scenes changing characters frequently (b) introduction and elaboration of matter not required for plot or character, (c) using soliloquies to give information (d) regular inconsistencies and

contradictions, (e) use of obscure, inflated and tasteless language 'pestered with metaphors', (f) uniform language of all his serious characters, (g) fondness for of 'gnomic' passages (Bradley 71-75) 71-75). Frank Kermode joined quoting Shakespeare, "O, it is excellent / To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous / To use it like a giant" (*MM* 2.2) to say how Shakespeare overdid his linguistic strength.

Shakespeare criticism has helped us raise questions of the literary canon, issues in editing, academic market, literary evolution, literary humanism, perspectivism, character, and moral agency. Authorship questions naively wondered whether an unlettered rustic can write literature, but led to the application of script analysis to interpretive sciences on Shakespeare. Concerns about the motivation of literary characters, their emotions, human nature, and ethics made his characters read as real people. The impact of such critical reading of his characters as real people has led to LC Knights' "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" attacking Bradley. This led to newer critical approaches.

Humanist interpretations foreground humanist values while looking at a text. For classical humanists, Pico Della Mirandola's 'Oration on the Dignity of Man' was the guiding principle. He believed that human beings become liberated by following the great works of literature which together present the complexity of the human condition. Humanist interpretations concentrate on the literal use of language before proceeding to figurative and metaphorical usages. Liberal humanists like Edward Pechter, Richard Levin and Graham Bradshaw give Humanist interpretations to Shakespeare. Shakespeare's meaning is more than literal. For example, the literal meaning of the opaque word "scammel" in *The Tempest* puzzles us. However, one fails to see through the deceptive transparency of the expression "falling in love at first sight", because it makes sense only in hindsight. This deceptive simplicity characterizes his language.

It accepts human diversity and relies on popular assumptions. A Hamlet has to take revenge, a Macbeth has to act against his will, a black Othello has to feel inferior; an all-powerful Prospero has to forgive and renounce because the prevailing popular assumptions wanted it to be so. This makes humanist criticism both ideal in contrast to the real. As readers' world changes because of ideological differences, Shakespeare's moral and ethical universe gets new interpretations. The foregrounding of universal human values delinks the historical context. This results in common-sense explanations of complex emotional and ethical dilemmas. The crisis mandates new interpretative methods like close reading, psychoanalysis, new historicism, myth criticism etc. relevant.

Character criticism which treats characters worthy of close analysis and extolled Shakespeare as a supreme artist who minutely delineated the traits of the human mind. It began during the Restoration, reached its zenith during the Romantic and Victorian periods and declined in the twentieth century with the emergence of Formalism and New Criticism. AC Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) remained influential even after the decline of character criticism. His tragedy was seen as "action issuing from the character" or "character issuing from action". Despite the onslaught of literary theory which treats character criticism shallow and sentimental, it survives in 'post-theory' subjectivity.

Source study measures Shakespeare's works in terms of dramatic conventions like revenge motif (*Hamlet*), pastoral themes (*As You Like It*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winters' Tale*, *The Tempest*) etc., amplification (*The Comedy of Errors*, *King Lear*, *Taming of the Shrew*), revisions (*Measure for Measure*, *Henry IV Part 1*), and borrowings (*The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*) (Scragg). By understanding how he has made old stories mean what he wanted to say by adding, changing, omitting elements from his source materials, one can understand his concerns. A close reading of the text, theatre, language, imagery, history and literature helps one to understand Shakespeare's conscious use of words and how

his texts unconsciously reflect. Formalists like William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, and Mikhail Bakhtin studied the formal elements within his text as tools to analyse him. The postulation of an intricate paradigm by Wilson Knight made him propose a symbolic universe in Shakespeare.

Self

Shakespeare created many characters who tried to know themselves and to understand and articulate the motives of their state of being. "I do not know / Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,' / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do't." (Ham. 4.4). What Shakespeare who has fashioned many selves says about self-understanding and self-deception is an interesting area of study. Joel Fineman's *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*: examines subjectivity in the Sonnets, and Harry Berger's *Making Trifles of Terrors* looks at Shakespearean complicities. The question of self has been an area of concern in psychoanalysis, sexuality studies, gender studies and feminist studies.

Psychological profiling of Shakespeare's characters may unravel the human mind, especially as one has the readers' advantage of hindsight. Such psychoanalytic studies primarily use the theories of Freud and Lacan. Psychoanalytic readings of Gustav Jung, Ernest Jones, Melanie Klein, Julia Kristeva, and Slavoj Žižek probe into Shakespeare's mind. Žižek even stated, "Shakespeare without a doubt had read Lacan". Bowdlerisation is another a rich area for psychoanalytic studies. Characters like Othello who succumbs easily to Iago, Anne who allows herself to be wooed by Richard III who killed her family, Macbeth who transforms from reasonable man to ruthless murderer, Hamlet who procrastinates offer critical insight into human decision-making.

Sexuality studies is a good field to study questions of identity. It uses Shakespeare's texts as pretexts to probe interiority and offer gay, lesbian and bisexual, transgender, and queer readings to his plays and the person himself. The Elizabethan criticism of the immorality and profaneness of the English stage can throw light into Elizabethan self-fashioning. Philip Stubbes's *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) mentions The Theatre and The Curtain at Shoreditch and how theatre facilitates licentiousness, homosexuality and the "such wanton gestures, such bawdy speeches, such laughing and fleering, such kissing and bussing, such clipping and culling, such winking and glancing of wanton eyes and the like is used as is wonderful to behold". Later, a century after Shakespeare, Puritan attack continued with increased vigour with Jeremy Collier attacking Shakespeare adapters like Dryden for undermining public morality in his "A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage" (1698).

Shakespeare's personal life, playhouse conventions involving boy actors, character-level manipulations like impersonation and cross-dressing, dialogue-level sexually charged dialogues, innuendos and puns, and the plot level manipulations are material for sexuality studies. Shakespeare's "sugared sonnets among his private friends" refer to a Fair Youth and Dark Lady. James I's favourites like Robert Carr and George Villiers showcase Elizabethan sexual ambiguity despite anti-homosexual laws. Shakespeare portrays a dichotomous and ambiguous range of homoerotic and homosexual desires (*As You Like It*); the instability of sexual and gender differences (Sebastian-Antonio-Olivia triangle in *The Twelfth Night*), and the bisexual and homosexual and heterosexual tension (Antonio-Bassanio-Portia triangle in *The Merchant of Venice*). Passages are fished out of *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry IV and V*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Coriolanus*. Joseph Pequigney's *Such Is My Love* is a queer reading of the *Sonnets*.

These readings also challenge his patriarchal language and such local adaptations. The feminist challenge to Christian gender hierarchy found in the Biblical advice "Wives, submit yourselves unto your

husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (Eph. 5.22-23), is also a challenge to established political structure with the king as the head. It is also significant to note that Shakespeare's strong female characters like Queen Katherine, Lady Macbeth, Tamora, Cleopatra who challenge male authority fail while his likeable female characters like Ophelia, Cordelia, Desdemona, Portia, Rosalind succeed by foregrounding vulnerability.

Society

Shakespeare is read and understood in terms of his society as well as that of current society. Ever since Hemming and Condell's capitalist logic "whatever you do, buy" in the First Folio started Shakespeare industry, he has been studied in terms of all major theories such as Positivism, Marxism, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism Post Humanism, Ecocriticism etc. He is analysed in terms of socio-economic and cultural factors by Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, Michael Foucault, Raymond Williams, Frederick Jameson, Pierre Macherey, and Slavoj Zizek. Karl Marx even refers to *Timon of Athens* to discuss money. The economic theory discusses how money, marketplace, and questions of economic exchange relevant to studying Shakespeare (Hawkes).

Cultural Materialists like Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, John Drakakis have used Shakespeare for their analysis and the concepts of cultural materialism to understand Shakespeare. Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Terry Eagleton, and Fredric Jameson read Shakespeare concerning society. New Historicists like Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt see him renewing himself to survive history and re-create history. Political readings by Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Fredric Jameson and Aime Cesaire read Shakespeare polemically.

Shakespeare Studies in the second half of the twentieth century sees history as a product of constant construction and read his history plays as his New Historicist tweaking of English History. His *Henry IV* and *Henry V* reflect the Elizabethan culture and attitude. Contemporary constructions of history must be also seen in Shakespeares' re-reading of Macbeth and Roman plays to reflect Elizabethan ideals.

How theory is applied to Shakespeare, what it says about him, and whether its practitioners are familiar enough with Shakespeare to speak about him authentically are more complex questions. Even Sigmund Freud, for example, was convinced that it was Earl of Oxford and not Shakespeare who wrote the plays. More insightful applications of psychoanalytical interpretations of Shakespeare come from Stanley Cavell's *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* and Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest*.

Postcolonialism discusses the rise of global capitalism in early modern Europe, representations of colonial power, and Shakespeare's place in colonial empire. African writers like Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Edward Said, and Sara Ahmed have re-read *The Tempest*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Merchant of Venice* in their postcolonial reality. Those postcolonial criticism shows that the meanings of Shakespeare's plays are neither intrinsic nor universal, but "draws our attention to the role played by Shakespeare's plays on *different historical occasions* relating to specific political struggles in recent times. Thus the impulse to historicize reaches toward *both* the past and the present" (Singh 494). It questions his portrayal of the English attitude towards the Irish, Welsh, Jews, savages, Moors, Turks, Africans, and Indians; the intention of trade and colonial aspirations; and the origin of the ideas such as masculine and superior west and feminine and decadent east. Aime Cesaire's adaptation of *The Tempest* prompted many to read Shakespeare in postcolonial light. This spawned more critical studies

about various subaltern racist movements based on gender, sexuality, race, nationalism, religion, culture, and language.

Expression

His works and others' readings of those have formed the critical paradigms that shaped Shakespeare criticism over time. The concepts and concerns he has raised and his language are used in literary and critical theories. Even as he influences and acts as a source of many critical reflections, he is also used to disprove many of them. For example, the biocultural criticism concurrently locates him in the realm of ecology as well as Posthumanism. This has made Terry Eagleton think that "it is difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was almost certainly familiar with the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein and Derrida".

While Structuralists like Roland Barthes (*Macbeth*), Roman Jakobson, and René Girard have used him to explain their theories. Questions like "what matters—that Shakespeare is the author of his plays or the plays themselves as texts—were important even before 1967 when Barthes became concerned about mythologizing Author into an omniscient proper noun. By analysing the complexity of language, it tries to see how meaning becomes something more than the obvious, liberating the text from the weight of regular readings.

Deconstructionism or the post-Nietzschean perspectivism that unmasks the imaginary stability of concepts and other metaphysical and ideological universals examines the conflict between the overtly stated and the unconsciously disclosed. It is a hybridization of *destruction* and construction and is based on the twin strategy of demolition and restitution. Shakespeare, who revels in the variety and volatility of the meaning of words with pun being his fatal Cleopatra, has been a goldmine for J Hillis Miller, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida. The quick repartee in marginal dialogues like those between Hamlet and the gravedigger (Ham), Touchstone-Rosalind-Celia (MND), Sebastian-Antonio-Gonzalo (Tmp.) etc. seem to play with our received notions of linguistic meaning. An example could be how Feste, Lady Olivia's "corrupter of words" plays with our notions of language:

Clown: A sentence is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit: how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!

Viola: Nay, that's certain; they that dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton.
(TN 3.1)

Shakespeare thrives in aporias or text's most contradictory moments. These help in deconstructing him. His statements reflecting his theatrical self-consciousness (Prologue in *Henry V*, Mousetrap in *Hamlet*, Macbeth's speech after Lady Macbeth's death, Prospero's renunciation speech in *The Tempest* etc) are some of these. "I am not what I am" by duplicitous Iago (*Oth.* 1.1) and disguised Viola (TN 3.1) challenge common sense and burst the apparent logic and give unexpected readings. "Gentle breath of yours my sails must fill, or else my project fails" (*Tmp.* Epi. 11-12) helps one locate Shakespeare behind the mask of Prospero.

Absence of definite reading leaves texts uncertain and exposes it to all readings. Derrida wilfully obscures writing shatters the illusion of text's coherence by challenging the traditional single, final and fixed meanings enshrined in language. Instead, it makes one alive to the plural, contradictory and incomplete meanings to open up the possibility for new readings while not prescribing a particular alternative reading.