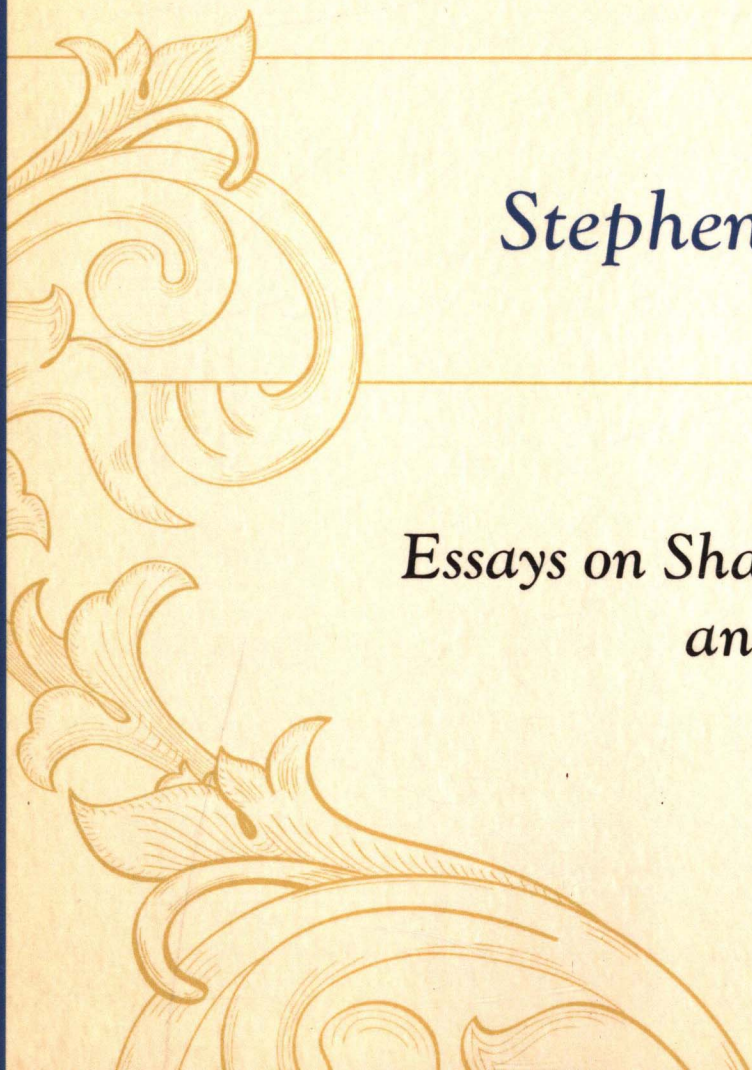


CLOSE READING WITHOUT READINGS

Stephen Booth

*Essays on Shakespeare
and Others*



Dealing mainly with the works of William Shakespeare, the essays in *Close Reading without Readings* reflect Stephen Booth's lifelong interest in uncovering the ways great literature works upon readers. As the book's title suggests, the author does not aim to create new or novel interpretations or to uncover the political agendas of literary works, but to notice language patterns—repetitions, analogies, correspondences, echoes, overtones—and other ways in which the choice and the arrangement of words affect readers. For Booth, close reading is a practice of attentiveness. He notices *how*, *why*, and *in what ways* Shakespeare's works affect his readers. Whether readers agree with the premises of a literary work or not, they subject themselves, knowingly or not, to its effects. For Booth, what we value in literature is the *experience*. He has devoted his own work to recognizing the nature, process, and functions of reading literature, and to teaching others to do the same. Recent years have seen Booth's efforts recognized by volumes dedicated both to close reading and to his achievements as editor, scholar, critic, and teacher.

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Essays on
Shakespeare and Others

Stephen Booth



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Close Reading without Readings

Foreword

This collection of essays by Stephen Booth—seven of them published for the first time—advances his distinctive readerly project. Reflective of his exhilarating, spirited, and inspiring contributions to Shakespeare studies during the last half-century, they challenge many of our core assumptions about literary texts and how to encounter them. As the title of this collection indicates, Booth does not “read” texts to settle their meanings, but to warn of the impossibility of settled meanings, since, in his view, a work’s resistance to interpretation is a chief source of its value. In doing so he may be said to exemplify, and indeed to pioneer, the practice of cutting-edge critical methodologies, notably deconstruction—while typically refusing to engage in the abstract and often vitriolic debates about those approaches that unhelpfully engaged the profession.

Even in his first published book, *The Book Called Holinshed’s Chronicles* (1968), Booth identified as parallels between the chronicler and the playwright their ability “constantly to shift the perspective of a reader or audience from one set of principles for judgment to another.” His essay “On the Value of *Hamlet*” (1969: republished here) continues his challenge to readers through its assertion that *Hamlet* is a play that makes sense—that satisfies deeply—because it consistently withstands our efforts to make sense of it. And in that same year of lustrous achievements came *An Essay on Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1969), in which he set out not to explain the poems but “to discover what in them results in the reading experience they evoke” (x). In 1977, Booth published his acclaimed edition of Shakespeare’s sonnets, “aiming to give a modern reader as much as I can resurrect of a Renaissance reader’s experience of the 1609 quarto” (ix)—

with the caveat that “many of Shakespeare’s locutions must have made his first readers as uneasy as they make modern readers” (xiv). Drawing on his extensive scholarly learning and critical acumen, delighting in wryness and paradox; Booth teases out and relishes a range of meanings in the sonnets, encouraging readers to do the same. In 1983 came *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Indefinition, and Tragedy*, in which he notes the ways Shakespeare’s refusal to fulfill generic promises, abide by patterns, provide finality, or keep characters within limits forces audiences to think in multiple dimensions and experience conflicted responses that enrich their experience of the plays. Succeeding years have produced work that further mobilizes the imaginations of readers and encourages their creative engagement with literary texts.

At the heart of Booth’s method is the practice of close reading, mainly, but not exclusively, in connection with the works of Shakespeare. Whether reading a passage from a play, a sonnet, a nursery rhyme, a song lyric, a children’s book, or a celebrated presidential address, Booth notices language patterns—repetitions, analogies, correspondences, echoes, overtones, and other ways in which the choice and the arrangement of words have an impact on the reader. For Booth, “close reading” does not aim at providing “readings,” for example, interpretations or meanings; his is a practice of attentiveness, of seeing how the words work upon the “listening mind” and how the “listening consciousness comprehends without noticing” (“On the Eventfulness of *Hero and Leander*”).

Booth’s attentiveness to how language works is at variance with what most Shakespeareans (and others) know as literary criticism, which invokes context to illumine meaning or associates literary works with worthy purposes, the goal being to offer new interpretations. While Booth’s work has deep implications for criticism, he demonstrates his independence from critical fashion by avoiding debates about critical theory. Reverential concerning poetry, which he considers “exciting, ennobling, valuable, and wonderful,” Booth describes literary criticism, by contrast, as “dull and substantively trivial” (“Poetic Richness: A Preliminary Audit”). His own practice of close reading notices *how*, *why*, and *in what ways* Shakespeare’s works affect his readers. “The one Shakespearean question I care about,” he has written, “is ‘What does Shakespeare do for his clients [readers] that makes him so special?’ And my basic answer . . . is that, most of the time, what he does is, in one way or another, beautiful” (“Deviation, Variation, and Variety in Stanza 1 of *Venus and Adonis*”).

To make beauty the highest—even the only—standard of value puts Booth at odds with modes of criticism that require “suspicious” reading, that ask consumers of art to unmask an author’s complicity with the dominant (and generally malign) forces of his or her day—patriarchy and colonialism, hegemony, gender bias, racism, and other political evils. To

value the aesthetic as a prime value, to apprehend the text in an uncritical manner, requires being “complicit” with a text as an object of beauty. On this issue, Booth declares his loyalties readily and easily. Readers may disagree with the premises of a literary work even as they submit themselves, knowingly or not, to its effects.

A broader question, which Booth raises in an era dominated by critical practices that are political, sociological, ideological, or theoretical, deals with an even more fundamental matter: what we value in literature. His answer is the *experience*. He has devoted his own work to recognizing the literary experience, attending to its nature, mechanics, and function, and teaching others to do the same. Booth’s goal is not to uncover hidden meanings but to reveal how a word, a phrase, or a passage finds its way into the reader’s mind.

But Booth’s Shakespeare is not simply a benevolent supplier of beauty, plying his craft for our delight. Rather, he has designs on us; he is a manipulator, tester, and joker who deliberately embarrasses, even humiliates, us by making us believe in impossibilities and absurdities that we are unwilling to swallow—and should not. There is mischief in Booth’s Shakespeare, who most resembles Shakespeare’s own Richard III. Like that usurping master of manipulation, Booth’s Shakespeare enjoys “victories of rhetoric over circumstance” (“The Acquiescent Audience”). In the wooing scene of *Richard III*, for example, we are made to play Lady Anne to Gloucester’s adept Shakespeare, who makes us accept, admire, and even revel in the outrageously improbable. Whatever Shakespeare’s “head game,” Booth believes that “the triumphs of artists—writers, composers, painters, sculptors, performers—are as enablers of triumphs in their audiences—readers and lookers and listeners” (“Faith in *The Winter’s Tale* and Faith in *The Winter’s Tale*”).

In the end, Booth’s project becomes especially fascinating, for even as he describes the ways in which Shakespeare’s words work, he himself engages in similar linguistic practices. Booth’s style entails deft arrangements of words that deliver his own designs, enabling readers of his carefully crafted passages to experience his own writing in a way that is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s practice and that, like Shakespeare’s accomplishment, remains independent of textual hermeneutics. The accomplished reader of Booth feels and knows the power of words and takes pleasure in noticing how the language Booth uses replicates the very linguistic practices it engages. As we make our way through each of Booth’s eleven papers on Shakespeare—and one each on Marlowe and Milton—we come to realize that Booth’s project, like Shakespeare’s, is to engage his readers in the *experience* of reading. It does not take long for a reader to realize that Booth never stops playing with language. Even as he attends to Shakespeare’s patterns of words, he is choosing and arranging his

own, constructing sentences that do just what he is saying Shakespeare's do. Booth's sentence parts never stop playing off one another; his words dance about, drawing attention to each other; and his lengthy insertions freeze-frame a sentence momentarily, only to start it up again. The essays in this collection not only exemplify Booth's close reading of Shakespeare; so also are they an experience in and of themselves, an experience of close reading differently.

For us at Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, this volume is not only an opportunity to provide readers with a collection of Stephen Booth's unpublished papers, joined by essays he wished to be included, but also to acknowledge his value to us all as scholars, educators, and lovers of the written and spoken word. In the course of developing this volume, we heard from many established scholars about his generous and consequential interventions in their professional and personal lives. Actors and directors similarly attest to the intensity of his interest in their work and of his willingness to span the country with abandon to see productions of interest to him. To include any would be to exclude too many, but it is a mark of his generous engagement with the profession and his colleagues that should not go unmentioned.

We admirably cite two recent publications that draw explicit inspiration from Stephen Booth's work and practice: *Shakespeare Up Close: Reading Early Modern Texts*, edited by Russ McDonald, Nicholas D. Nace, and Travis D. Williams (London: Bloomsbury / Arden, 2012), and *Reading What's There: Essays in Shakespeare in Honor of Stephen Booth*, edited by Michael J. Collins (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2014).

Close Reading without Readings: Essays on Shakespeare and Others offers thirteen encounters with passages from Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Milton by a master reader of poetry. Booth's often quoted essay "On the Value of *Hamlet*," originally published in *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Norman Rabkin (Columbia University Press, 1969), 137–76, anchors five others that were previously published—"Poetic Richness: A Preliminary Audit," *Pacific Coast Philology* 19.1-2 (1984): 68–78; "A Discourse on the Witty Partition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," in *Inside Shakespeare: Essays on the Blackfriars Stage*, ed. Paul Menzer (Susquehanna University Press / Associated University Presses, 2006), 216–22; "*Twelfth Night* and *Othello*: Those Extraordinary Twins," in *Shakespeare Set Free: Teaching Twelfth Night and Othello*, ed. Peggy O'Brien (Washington Square Press, 1995), 22–32; "On the Eventfulness of *Hero and Leander*," in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman: Lives, Stage, and Page*, ed. Sarah K. Scott and M. L. Stapleton (Ashgate, 2010), 125–36; and "Liking Julius Caesar," published in pamphlet form in the "Living with Shakespeare" series, Centre for Shakespeare Studies, Southern Oregon State College, Ashland, Oregon, 1987—and seven

that Fairleigh Dickinson University Press has the privilege of publishing here for the first time. As director of the Press, I am grateful to the above-named publishers for permission to reprint and to Brett Gamboa and June Schlueter for their help in assembling this collection. Peggy O'Brien, Heather Dubrow, Russ McDonald, James Hirsh, Stanley Fish, Ralph Alan Cohen, and Joan Saxton gave support and sage advice at various stages of the project. Special thanks to Stephen Booth for his guidance, cooperation, and friendship—and for his invaluable contributions to the study of literature and the appreciation of theater.

Harry Keyishian
Director, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press
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1



Poetic Richness, a Preliminary Audit

Antony and Cleopatra 3.10

This paper is addressed to everyone who talks—in classrooms, essays, or both—about “the poetry” of Shakespeare’s plays and, less directly, to everyone concerned with what can be described—loosely, vaguely, but efficiently and adequately—as “the poetry” of any “poetic” literature. This paper is all but exclusively devoted to analysis of one short, minimally significant scene in one play: *Antony and Cleopatra* 3.10. It therefore promises to be narrower and more specialized than I intend it to be. In fact, my ambitions are general and sweeping—perhaps presumptuously so.

My purpose—as it usually is when I get a chance to preach in public—is to recommend by example the proposition that academic literary analysis can have a function other than its customary one: demonstrating that works really are or really mean what they have not previously suggested themselves to be or mean.

More particularly, I intend this paper as a public demonstration of opposition to the understandable but pernicious assumption that literary criticism should sacrifice precision and exhaustiveness (1) in order not to be exhausting and (2) in order to mirror the large-spiritedness and gentlemanly disdain for sweat and petty detail that characterize the works we admire and study. There is no reason why criticism should not be pleasing to read, but, if literary analysis is responsible and thorough, it is unlikely to be pleasing to read—and should not necessarily be asked to be so. We should stop trying to produce minor-league literary shadows of the works we study. It is only an accident that we work in the same medium—words—as the objects we study. (Musicologists do not try to be

melodic. Entomologists don't try to make silk or turn into butterflies. And map makers do not affect bad posture to imitate the curve of the earth.)

To talk about the poetry of Shakespeare's plays is to talk about unimportant things—about elements that do not import. What makes poetry exciting, ennobling, valuable, and wonderful is itself dull and substantively trivial. But the elements that inspire us to use the label *poetic* are as subtle and as vital as they are dry, wispy, and dull.

I am going to spend the rest of my time talking about the tenth scene in act three of *Antony and Cleopatra*. That scene is only thirty-seven words long and is thus short enough to quote. For convenience, I also quote the four-line scene that precedes 3.10.¹

3.9

Enter Antony and Enobarbus.

Antony. Set we our squadrons on yond side o' th' hill,
In eye of Caesar's battle; from which place
We may the number of the ships behold,
And so proceed accordingly. *Exit [with Enobarbus].*

3.10

Canidus marcheth with his land army one way over the stage, and Taurus, the lieutenant of Caesar, the other way. After their going in is heard the noise of a seafight. Alarum. Enter Enobarbus.

Enobarbus. Naught, naught, all naught! I can behold no longer.
Th' Antoniad, the Egyptian admiral,
With all their sixty, fly and turn the rudder:
To see't mine eyes are blasted.

Enter Scarus.

Scarus. Gods and goddesses,
All the whole synod of them!

Enobarbus. What's thy passion?

Scarus. The greater cantle of the world is lost
With very ignorance; we have kissed away
Kingdoms and provinces.

Enobarbus. How appears the fight?

Scarus. On our side like the tokened pestilence,
Where death is sure. Yon ribaudred nag of Egypt—
(Whom leprosy o'ertake!)—I' th' midst o' th' fight,
When vantage like a pair of twins appeared,
Both as the same, or rather ours the elder,
The breese upon her, like a cow in June,
Hoists sails, and flies.

Enobarbus. That I beheld:
Mine eyes did sicken at the sight, and could not
Endure a further view.