

Shakespeare

An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000

Edited by Russ McDonald



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Preface



This book is designed to be useful to a “great variety of readers,” to borrow a marketing phrase from the front matter of the 1623 Folio. In the present case, the intended audience is probably narrower than that imagined by Heminges and Condell, but within and even beyond the broad field of Shakespeare studies, many kinds of people may find it helpful – scholars, teachers, critics, undergraduate and graduate students, directors, actors, curious general readers, lovers of Shakespeare. It collects in a single volume much important critical writing on Shakespeare during the second half of the twentieth century. The motive for assembling such a collection is to provide a comprehensive yet handy record of that era, a means of surveying the scholarship, interpretation, and theory that burgeoned during a period of exceptional industry and rapid change in the Anglo-American academy. The criticism reprinted here has been taken from a variety of journals and books, sources normally scattered and sometimes difficult to locate. The editor, in consultation with a vast number of colleagues and advisors, has selected the nearly fifty pieces and, in hopes of making them as helpful as possible, grouped them into categories. Therefore, although this volume is in no sense an introduction to the discipline of Shakespearean scholarship, some prefatory words are in order on several topics: the uses of the materials collected herein, the criteria for selection, and the logic of arrangement.

The world of Shakespeare scholarship can be formidable to new students – and also to more experienced scholars. Literary criticism has changed so rapidly and expanded so multifariously in our time that the conventions of reading observed by critics a mere twenty years ago can seem remote and puzzling. This anthology offers a practical way of entering that world and comprehending those conventions, containing as it does a range of influential and representative interpretation written over a 56-year period. The essays are grouped and divided into manageable sections so that the reader does not face an undifferentiated heap of scholarship and criticism, much of it unfamiliar

and perhaps contradictory. Instead, each essay exhibits affinities with the other pieces in its group, and in some cases writers respond directly to one another. Those resemblances, along with the brief commentary prefacing each section, provide at least some context for approaching each piece.

Taken as a whole, the contents offer a reasonably thorough survey of Shakespeare studies during the second half of the twentieth century. Students and younger scholars are (properly) encouraged to read the latest critical writing on the topic they've chosen to investigate. This emphasis on recent analysis, however, sometimes has the effect of depreciating or dismissing valuable readings from earlier decades. We should often remind ourselves that our critical predecessors were no less intelligent than we, that in their time most of them were resolutely up to date, and that much may be learned from critical studies that may strike us initially as old fashioned or irrelevant. Learning to read critics from earlier generations fosters historical awareness and critical perspective. Sometimes our neglect of the recent past is not a case of will but of unfamiliarity: how does one begin, for example, in an effort to understand genre criticism of the 1950s and 1960s? This volume offers some help with that kind of problem. Most of the chapters and articles, thanks to their footnotes and bibliographies, are also useful as sources of further reading. In the twentieth-first century, the Internet has become for many students the starting place for literary research, and more and more historical material is becoming accessible on-line. As the work printed here will indicate, however, websites should not be the student's only resource. Old books and back numbers of periodicals not yet digitized offer an almost endless supply of illuminating and sometimes startling interpretation.

It is a pretty safe bet that the contents of this book will not entirely please a single one of its readers, so immense and intractable is the problem of selection. The table of contents is the result of compromises, concessions, trade-offs, and debates that most readers will wish had resolved themselves in some other ways. Consider the problem of familiarity. Janet Adelman's essay on *Coriolanus* has been reprinted many times in various collections; arguably, therefore, it might be omitted so as to leave space for a less well-known piece. And yet if the volume is to meet its goal of furnishing the reader with major critical texts of the last half of the twentieth century – and as many of them as possible, please – then leaving out “Anger's my meat” would be a mistake. Consider next the problem of critical representation, i.e., the question of who or what should be included so as to create a “representative” sample of interpretive work. Arguably, there are several critics from the second half of the twentieth century whose intellectual contributions have been so great and whose views have been so influential that they deserve to be represented by more than one piece. But commensurate inclusion of prestigious critics would preclude a just representation of the period's hermeneutic variety, hence the artificial limit of one piece per writer.

To adhere to the one-item-per-critic principle makes the act of choosing the most appropriate chapter or article daunting indeed. Sometimes other demands have helped in making that kind of choice: for example, Professor X's slightly less impressive or less typical piece (call it *A*) may appear in this volume, preferred to another of hers (call it *B*) because while *B* is celebrated and apparently essential, *A* examines a particular play that would otherwise go untreated here. An effort has been made to attend to as many plays as possible with as little overlap as possible, an aim calculated to make the book

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various and useful. All these desiderata and strictures have entailed a series of concessions. Therefore the reader should not assume that the essay here included on *Macbeth* is in the eyes of the editor the best essay on *Macbeth* written in the last half of the twentieth century; the reader may safely assume that in the eyes of the editor it is one of the best. The book also contains essays on groups of plays, essays on tiny sections of plays, essays that scarcely mention plays, and other kinds as well. That *Othello* is treated more abundantly in these pages than, say, *Hamlet* is a fair indicator of the preferences of the age. I have attempted to include entire essays and chapters, offering excerpts only in a very few cases where the length of the original is prohibitive.

Not only has it been impossible to find a place for every piece that ought to be here, it has also been impossible even to find a place for every *kind* of piece that ought to be here. For example, research on early modern performance practices, especially the acting companies, their personnel, their finances, and other such historical data, has been vital to the study of Shakespeare during the period covered, but it is not easily excerpted and individual pieces or sections of books do not do justice to its value and utility. Such archival scholarship has enabled and improved the work of many critics and is readily available elsewhere for those who need it.

Unfortunately, the need to keep the collection to a reasonable size has meant that many, many worthy essays, chapters, articles, notes, queries, lectures, letters to the editor, and other forms of criticism and scholarship have been omitted. To those critics disappointed by the absence of their work, the editor can only say that he too is disappointed by the absence of their work. Most of them may be comforted by the knowledge that one of their essays was included in the original table of contents. That book, however, would have been as long as Holinshed's *Chronicles*.

As for temporal limits, the publisher and I wanted to gather and make available excellent work from the second half of the twentieth century, so the end date is obvious. "1945," the date given in the title, is a slight misrepresentation, chosen so as to indicate that the book is concerned with criticism after World War II. In fact one piece reprinted here appeared in 1944: in that year, E. M. W. Tillyard published *Shakespeare's History Plays*, and many early essays in new historicism and cultural materialism constitute direct objections or rejoinders to that exponent of the old historicism. If a reader perceives that the table of contents is tilted unfairly towards the end of the century, such an imbalance is dictated by the wider range of criticism written in 1990 than in 1950. Readers who believe that the volume contains too many men, or too many women, or too many US citizens, or too few textual scholars, or too much psychoanalytic criticism, or too much or too little of anything else are probably right. Such excesses and shortcomings are inescapable in an enterprise of this kind.

Arrangement has also been a problem. The 14 categories into which the material is divided are arbitrary and unsatisfactory. Many other schemes might have been devised, but each of those would probably have been just as unsatisfactory. It may be, for example, that reader-response criticism does not warrant its own category. The advisability of separating Feminist Criticism and Studies in Gender and Sexuality is debatable, but such a division seems appropriate to the critical scene at the end of the twentieth century as it would not have seemed fifteen years earlier. Also notable is the absence of Deconstruction as a rubric. Although some of its vocabulary and principles have perforce made their way into other modes of critical reading, deconstruction *per*

Preface

se made little impact on Shakespeare studies, few Shakespeareans identified themselves as “deconstructionists,” and thus a separate section seems unearned. One theme that presents itself over and over again is that every species of critical thinking, no matter how distinctive it may seem, is implicated with many others. The resulting impurity of most schools of criticism, their tendency to interpenetrate, means that many of the essays might reasonably have appeared in different categories. The excerpt from William Empson, for example, could have been included under “Close Readers” instead of “New Criticism” (in this case, temporal affinity governed the choice); much psychoanalytic criticism turns out to be feminist in orientation; Robert Weimann’s work is germane both to performance studies and to cultural materialism. And the sections vary in emphasis and in size. Some contain a piece disputing the conclusions or methods of that kind of criticism; this is relatively rare, but in a couple of cases the rhetorical power of the objection won the dissenting essay a slot. Readers will probably complain less about the divisions than about their contents.

Finally, a caveat about the editorial material that precedes each group of essays. I have attempted in a very few words to give merely a flavor of the subdiscipline represented by the critical pieces included there. Inconsistencies abound, in that some of these prefaces offer a foretaste of the work to follow, while others attempt a more general account of the critical area. Few people are authorities on all fields of Shakespeare criticism – certainly not the editor. But it seemed desirable to provide a minimal sense of context and at least to mention the major concerns of each kind of criticism, especially for those readers who are new to Shakespeare studies or who were born after about 1980. Many users of this book will prefer to skip the introductory matter and get on to what they came for, the essays themselves.

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