

The Role of the Critic. A Critical Review of
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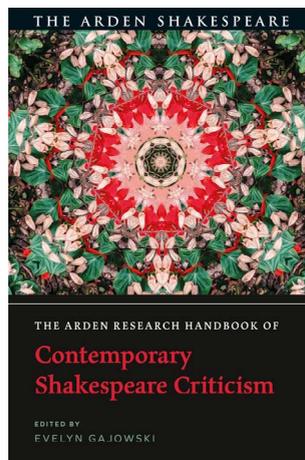
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What is the role of the critic today? In her introduction to *The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*, the editor Evelyn Gajowski marks that “many of the essays [...] suggest the inseparability of critical practices on the one hand and social justice and political activism on the other.”¹ In the current politicized climate, some might find this to be sacrilege. Objections in this line of thinking tend to be two-fold: first, the critic should not contaminate the work with their political activism; and second, the study of Shakespeare has nothing to do with modern politics and social justice. These objections present two interrelated aspects: the former focusing on the critic’s subjectivity, and the latter on the object of study.

1 All quotations from Gajowski, Evelyn, ed. 2020 *The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*. London: Bloomsbury come from a book review copy with unnumbered pages.

The aforementioned subject and object are not wholly isolated things and are indeed integrated in the role of the critic, who is positively a subject, a person doing criticism, but who already has a negative side in being a critic of something, empty without an object of study. Moreover, the question of what the critic should do is implicit in the idea of *The Arden Shakespeare Handbooks*, as the preface for the series states, in that they “provide both a thorough grounding ... and a practical guide that equips readers to conduct their own independent research.” Indeed, the tension between subjective and objective aspects animates this book, if not the practice of contemporary Shakespeare criticism.

As Christopher Marlow points out in his piece on cultural materialism, “[w]hen any critic opens a text they inevitably bring their own quirks and prejudices with them.” Marlow also encapsulates the “cultural materialist mode” of writing in the motto: “to engage with the past, be informed by the present, but committed to the future.” Interestingly, this motto also describes how most of the chapters in this book are structured: each type of study is given a history, situated in the present and simultaneously opening a future by giving a reading of a Shakespeare play, poem or performance. For example, Michelle M. Dowd gives an overview of genre studies from Russian formalists and Northrop Frye via Marxist and post-structuralist approaches to new formalism culminating in a novel reading of *The Winter’s Tale* that solidifies the previous discussion and opens up new avenues for further study; Anthony Guy Patricia deftly surveys the rich and varied history of queer studies from Michel Foucault and Alan Bray to the resistant unhistoricism and homohistory of Madhavi Menon, while ending in “a case study of how to read *Much Ado* without being heterosexist.”

In the early 80’s Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer and Nobel laureate, asked us to consider “the critic as a socially-situated producer, and therefore as a creature of social conditioning” (1981, 133). Indeed, no critic—or person for that matter—lives in a vacuum. Kent Cartwright, in his article on close reading and New Criticism describes the situation in which close reading is done today:

Only intrepid students practise it, guided in shabby classrooms by suspect faculty, hunted by academic administrators who would convert them to engineering majors and harangued by capitalist boosters for ruinously trading their futures as lords of Wall Street for thin-gruel lives as baristas.

Christopher Marlow, in his description on the continuing importance of cultural materialism and one of its key proponents, the late Alan Sinfield, complements the above student point of view with that of the academic:

In a market-driven era in which university academics are enjoined by their employers to have allegiance to nothing except their own institutions, and indeed when some academics are disciplined or even dismissed for speaking publicly about the failures of those institutions, Sinfield's approach remains not only refreshing but also urgently relevant.

Therefore, in this context, it should be no surprise when Christian Smith in his piece on Marxist studies connects the dots between the role of the Marxist critic and political activism: "If one is genuinely committed to one's criticism, then the logical conclusion of Marxist Shakespeare criticism is an activist political stance." Here Smith brings together the critic's theory and practice—but it is also brought together in the figure of Marx. In an exceptional move (both within this book and introductions to Marxist criticism in general), Smith opens up Marxist Shakespeare studies through Marx's lifelong study of Shakespeare—with due acknowledgement to the seminal influence of Jenny Marx (née von Westphalen)—and how this is endemic to Marx's theoretical work. Smith rightly points out "Marxist Shakespeare critics ... do not simply read economics in Shakespeare; theirs is a political oppositional reading of the social relationships that underlie the economics." The critic is a creature reflecting on their and our social conditioning.

In making their subject-position explicit, the critic allows their audience to form their own interpretation based on the critic's presentation. This reflective practice is most clearly brought to the fore by Jessica McCall in her excellent chapter on feminist studies. McCall acknowledges the subjective position of the critic, while leaving space for the reader: "The following chapter, then, should not be understood as a prescriptive authority (this is what feminism is, this is how feminist studies is done) but as a descriptive overview." As with all of the chapters in this book, there is an inherent plurality or intersectionality at play as the reflective critic understands that no single answer or approach can resolve everything—such a singularity should rightly seem suspicious. Commenting on the homogenisation and authority of scholarly discourse, McCall states that,

feminist studies must resist this homogenization by learning to be comfortable with the uncomfortable. It must remain unapologetically political and studied in unapologetically personal ways. To engage in feminist work is to resist doing what you're told – to engage in feminist work is to do what you can.

McCall is one of the few in this book who expressly distinguishes criticism from theory: "Criticism studies the effects of sexism, but theory answers what sexism

is and why it exists.” She continues: “We cannot answer questions about Lady Macbeth without the theory, but the theory is useless without connecting it to lived experience. The particularities of our lived experiences – our subject positions – are a big deal.” It is the work of the critic that brings together theory and practice, though this only happens when the critic extends their role through their work enabling other individuals and the wider community to act. The critic should not deal in dogma as that hinders the potential power within the subject position.

These thoughts are echoed by Michael Bristol in his chapter on character studies. Bristol highlights how our own characters are enmeshed in our discussion of Shakespeare’s characters. The aesthetic experience we get sometimes also engulfs ourselves in our interpretation of that experience. This is reflected in the impossibility of a critic (or anybody, for that matter) to shed their subjectivity in writing about the object of their study. Having feelings is not a drawback—yet they too need to be interpreted. Bristol writes: “character study asks for a performance; not just the one we are watching or the one we are imagining as we read but the self-reflexive one we feel and comprehend in our own response.”

The work of the critic not only mediates interpretative practice but is also the result of their own reflective subjectivity. McCall again expresses this and the stakes at play clearly:

Most feminist criticism is a combination of theoretical approaches, but all must maintain the dual awareness of a world outside the self which is always interpreted through the self. Denial of this dual awareness maintains the status quo – if personal experience isn’t allowed to serve as evidence, then narratives from marginalized communities, narratives which reveal the power imbalances and injustices perpetuated through ideological, legislative and economic structures, are silenced.

This dual awareness speaks to how the subject and object inform each other. As our subjectivity is more complicated than perhaps at first thought so is the object. Therefore, criticism about Shakespeare is never just about Shakespeare.

Besides the complexity of what we mean by Shakespeare (the person, the works, the influence), the temporal distance raises other issues; for instance, what does it mean to look at the past? The eminent historian E. H. Carr wrote in the early 60’s that “history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems” (1987, 21). Here Carr is echoing the Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce writing in the late 30’s (*History as the story of liberty*, 2000) and a similar point is made by the German critical theorist Walter Benjamin in 1940 (“Theses on the philosophy of history,” 1999). The influence of this insight can most clearly be seen in presentism. In his

exemplary chapter on presentist studies Miguel Ramalhete Gomes explains that presentism “crucially understands this critical, theoretical and political present as an inescapable and enabling factor in making meaning with Shakespeare.” Presentism is another ubiquitous influence in this book alongside Marxism and feminism. Though often seen in opposition to historicism, Gomes points out that “presentism has sought instead to complement historicist work with an equally complex awareness of the importance of the critic’s own context in shaping Shakespearean criticism.” It should be noted that the important chapter on New Historicism in this handbook is written by Hugh Grady, one of the most influential exponents of presentism.

Even if Shakespeare is studied in the past, it is never out of touch with the present. Indeed, it should be considered whether the object of study itself is ever simply Shakespeare. In terms of history, the past has formed what is our present. Moreover, as Alexa Alice Joubin in her chapter on global studies, and Ruben Espinosa in his chapter on postcolonial studies point out, Shakespeare, due to a long history of colonisation and cultural interaction, has long since ceased to be a merely English phenomenon. Furthermore, as the chapters on ecocriticism (by Randall Martin) and ecofeminism (by Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche) make clear, the study of Shakespeare can shed light on current issues of water rights or the liminal spaces occupied by people who seek refuge. The modern critic’s work, though mediated by Shakespeare, is about the world we live in. The twentieth-century German sociologist and philosopher, Max Horkheimer, differentiates between traditional and critical theory in his seminal 1937 essay, saying that critical activity “has society itself for its object” (1982, 206) and that critical theory is “dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life” (1982, 199).

This idea is echoed by Arthur L. Little in the chapter on critical race studies as well as by Katherine Schaap Williams in her chapter on disability studies. Williams writes: “[b]ecause critical disability studies emerges from the disability rights movement, disability studies is bound up with disability justice in the pursuit of a world that supports the flourishing of humans in their full range of diverse bodies and minds.” This ethos of working towards a better world is also mirrored by the humanities play in academia, as Little states: “at its broadest disciplinary reach [critical race studies is] fighting for the soul of the humanities itself and, yes, for the progressive (or troubled) soul of Shakespeare.”

It is along the multidisciplinary lines of this handbook that I have conflated these disparate voices to speak of the critic’s role as if in one voice. But I do not want to put words in the mouths of others and make it seem as if every critic would have the same idea of their role in academia or society. But what this collection does do is open up possibilities of thinking differently and learning

from others. The book is structured in a roughly chronological order, each chapter is useful in not only providing a history of each form of study but also clarifies important terms and offers a good bibliography for further study. Moreover, there are helpful appendices with a glossary and annotated bibliography.

Nevertheless, I have two minor issues. First, the chapter on computational studies was a difficult read mainly due the epub format not showing any of the tables. Scholars will find a pdf or hardcopy more useful—especially with the stable page numbers for citational ease. Second, the final chapter on cognitive ethology studies seems to be written in a slightly different register than the other chapters. Although Craig Dionne’s writing is very thought-provoking (a very interesting study on repetition drawing from cognitive studies and evolutionary criticism), I was still left in the dark on what cognitive ethology studies is and how is it differentiated from posthumanist studies. But this is the problem with emerging fields of study—this will be clarified in time.

In conclusion, this is an indispensable help for all critics, young and old. Personally, one of the most important insights that his collection imparts is how the subject and object are intertwined and how it impacts on the critic’s work. The object cannot be purged of subjectivity (be it politics, feelings or experiences)—like all ideas of purity, it is only pure in ideology. The Frankfurt school critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno wrote in the mid-sixties “[t]he superiority of objectification in the subjects not only keeps them from becoming subjects; it equally prevents a cognition of objectivity” (1973, 171). Any proper objectivity in criticism (or any other endeavour) can only be achieved by accepting and making clear the subjective element inherent in the work.

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