**General Introduction**

Why do we still read Shakespeare today?

His fame throughout the centuries means that we would miss allusions to his characters and plots and would misunderstand quotations from his plays unless we study his work.

In his plays, as in all literature from past times, we find both differences of thought from our own and similarities of feeling to our own. Human knowledge changes, not human emotions.

His plays continue to be produced on stage and continue to work as scripts for production; in addition, the poetry of his language rewards our reading these texts with close attention.

What do we need to know to read Shakespeare today?

We need to understand his language, Early Modern English. If you are viewing a production, staging and acting should help with that; if you are reading a text, there should be helpful notes.

We need to be able to read verse. His plays are all in a mix of prose and verse; a typical speech is in unrhymed iambic pentameter, often ended with a rhymed couplet. If these terms are unfamiliar to you, Google them and become familiar with them before reading any of the plays.

We probably don’t need the details of his life, but he was born in 1564 and married Anne Hathaway in 1582; they had Susanna in 1583 and Hamnet and Judith in 1585; he died in 1616.

The plays evoke opposing responses in different readers, such as profeminist v. antifeminist, subversive v. authoritarian, idealistic v. materialistic; they evoke opposing responses in the same reader at different times; they evoke opposing responses in the same reader simultaneously.

Differences in interpretation stem partly from the fact that these are plays; the author does not have a voice, and the characters who speak are in conflict with one another.

Also, Shakespeare’s time was one of religious changes, scientific revolutions, and shifts in the understanding of marriage, family, and child-rearing. Consequently, his characters may disagree with each other on many topics, as people in his time did.

Finally, these plays had to succeed with three quite different audiences: if they were printed, they had to pass the censors; at the public theatre, they had to please diverse theatre-goers; and when they were produced at court, they had to suit the monarch.

How then do we interpret a Shakespeare play?

Professional critics often consider some aspect of the play to be privileged over the others: for example, the ending’s resolution of conflict might reflect Shakespeare’s values; the upper (or lower) class of characters might speak for him; the imagery in the play might belong more to the author than to the characters who use it. Some critics believe they understand Shakespeare’s beliefs about politics, religion, or psychology, and can use those as a guide to interpretation.

My ground rules are that you should (1) acknowledge all your own responses, (2) admit the existence of evidence that opposing responses might be valid, (3) take the characters at face value when they aren’t lying [i.e., read the lines themselves; don’t read between the lines], and (4) imagine whether and, if so, how your interpretation could be conveyed in performance.

Please note that you must analyze what is causing each of your responses. If it is something Shakespeare is doing, you are beginning to understand his text, but if something in your memories is triggering a response, it is irrelevant to the play.

It’s also useful to know a little about the old beliefs that were challenged during the Early Modern period; in addition to some changes in language, significant alteration of these beliefs distinguishes the Modern period in which we live from the Early Modern period of Shakespeare.

Earth was at the center of eight concentric spheres, containing the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the stars. Each of the first seven celestial spheres was governed by an angel, but God governed the stellar sphere. Below the sphere of the Moon, Earth was a fallen world governed (in general) only by Nature.

God’s creation forms a great chain of beings in a hierarchy; from lowest to highest, they are minerals, vegetables, animals, humans, angels, and God. There are no empty niches.

All humans are ruled by the law of Nature (e.g., obedience to one’s parents, reproduction of one’s species, and care for one’s children); most humans are also ruled by the law of Nations (e.g., obedience to one’s ruler, defense of one’s country, and care for one’s fellow citizens); and a country’s citizenry is further ruled by the country’s laws.

Macrocosms and microcosms are analogous to each other: e.g., the soul is to the body as the father to the family, the sovereign to the country, and God to the universe. A disruption in any hierarchical relationship will cause disruptions in others; that’s why stormy weather often accompanies disorder in the body, the family, or the country and why political ills such as rebellion occur together with domestic ills in the ruler’s family.

And two observations in closing:

Civil wars and wars of conquest were about which dynasty would be sovereign, not about whether monarchy would be the political system (it would be).

Religious disputes were about which religion would be the established norm for a country, not about whether others would be tolerated (they wouldn’t be).