HOW TO READ SHAKESPEARE (OR ANYONE ELSE)

As with all things, it is best to begin with the basics. Before we can understand how to read Shakespeare properly, we need to know how to read properly, and before we can know how to read properly we must know how to think properly.

There are two ways of thinking. We can think objectively or we can think subjectively. Thinking objectively requires an engagement with the reality beyond ourselves in such a way that we understand the necessity of conforming ourselves to that reality. Such thought is centred not in the self but in the other. We come to understand ourselves through an understanding of the other, i.e. the truth that exists outside ourselves. Thinking subjectively engages all experience from the perspective of the self and judges it accordingly. Such thought is centred not in the other but in the self. We judge the other from the way that we personally experience it. There is no better and more succinct way of expressing these two ways of thinking than through G.K. Chesterton’s response to Holbrook Jackson:

*Jackson*: A lie is that which you do not believe.

*Chesterton*: This is a lie: so perhaps you don’t believe it.

*Jackson*: Truth and falsehood in the abstract do not exist.

*Chesterton*: Then nothing else does.

*Jackson*: Truth is one’s own conception of things.

*Chesterton*: The Big Blunder. All thought is an attempt to discover if one’s own conception is true or not.

*Jackson*: Negations without affirmations are worthless.
Chesterton: And impossible.

Jackson: Every custom was once an eccentricity; every idea was once an absurdity.

Chesterton: No, no, no. Some ideas were always absurdities. This is one of them.

Jackson: No opinion matters finally: except your own.

Chesterton: Said the man who thought he was a rabbit.¹

In this exchange, Chesterton is thinking objectively and Jackson is thinking subjectively. Chesterton is on the side of philosophical realism, a belief that metaphysical things such as love, virtue and beauty are real, i.e. that they exist as an independent reality whether we believe it or not, or like it or not. Jackson is on the side of philosophical nominalism or relativism, a belief that there are no absolute truths or values, and that love, virtue and beauty are not things that really exist but are concepts constructed and labeled by the human mind to make sense of its experience. Clearly these two positions are mutually incompatible. They cannot both be true. If one is true the other is, ipso facto, false.

The present author is definitively and decidedly on the side of philosophical realism, which is to say that he is on the side of not only Chesterton but also Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas – and Shakespeare! This being so, he will argue definitively and decidedly that to think objectively is to think correctly and realistically, whereas to think subjectively is to think incorrectly and unrealistically. And if this is true of the way we think, it is equally true of the way we read. One must read objectively in order to read correctly and realistically.

Objective reading is, first and foremost, a discipline. In order to read objectively we must discipline ourselves to avoid all temptations to subjectivity, which is to say we must avoid approaching the text with our own prejudices. On the assumption, objectively speaking, that the text is not nonsense, it makes sense. As such, we do not make sense of a text, it should make sense to us, and perhaps in the case of really good books it might not only make sense to us, it might make sense of us! It might make us understand ourselves better in the light of the truth that comes from beyond ourselves. This is the greatest fruit of objective reading. It enables us to transcend ourselves, and our selfishness, in our engagement with the great truths of the cosmos. It enables us to grow in the presence of the genius manifested in the text. A subjective reading, on the other hand, working on the prejudiced presumption that “truth is one’s own conception of things” or that “no opinion matters except your own”, will be unable to transcend the self in its “making sense” of the book because nothing makes sense except the self! The tragedy is that the subjective reader is unable to grow in the presence of the genius manifested in the text because there is, for the subjective reader, no greater genius than himself!

Having discussed the two types of reading, it is necessary to understand that there are essentially two types of books, the scientific and the artistic. Scientific books deal with facts and facts alone, whereas artistic books engage the creative imagination. In the case of the former, the facts should quite literally speak for themselves. In the case, for

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2 Although strictly and purely speaking there are only two types of books, many books are a combination of these two types. Books of history, for instance, will deal with facts, hopefully authenticated by annotated sources, but will also be subject to the historian’s meta-historical presumptions based on his philosophical understanding of man and society. Since an understanding of history is derived from our philosophical understanding of reality, historians invariably read the same set of facts and come to different conclusions as to their significance. The same is true of other academic arts, mistakenly claiming to be sciences, such as politics or economics.
instance, of a book of arithmetic, we can only read “25 x 2 = 50” in one way. In other words, there is no room, and no possibility, of reading a scientific text in any way but objectively. In the case of a more advanced work of physics we might see another equation, “e = mc²”. In this case, we might not understand the intricacies of the theory of which the equation is an expression but we will still know that it must be read objectively. If it doesn’t make sense to us, we know or trust that it still makes sense nonetheless. If we don’t understand, we know that we don’t understand. In the case of artistic books, however, the meaning of the text is not so obvious. How can we read artistic books objectively when there seem to be so many possible interpretations of their meaning?

The only way of reading an artistic text objectively is to see it, as far as possible, through the eyes of the author, who is not only the “other”, enabling us to escape from the confines of our own subjective prejudices, but the “other” who speaks with more authority than all the other “others”, i.e. literary critics.

In order to understand why the author has the authority to speak authoritatively about the text, we need to understand the nature, and supernature, of the creative process. This whole issue and its relationship to the reader’s understanding of the work was expressed by J.R.R. Tolkien when he wrote that “only one’s guardian Angel, or indeed God Himself, could unravel the real relationship between personal facts and an author’s works. Not the author himself (though he knows more than any investigator), and certainly not so-called ‘psychologists’.”

In these few words we are given the tools to

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form a true appraisal of the role and limitations of literary criticism. Let’s look closer at what he is saying.

One does not need to share Tolkien’s Christian faith in order to recognize, or agree with, his insistence on the transcendent nature of the creative process and its products. The pagan poets invoked the Muse and even an atheist such as Percy Bysshe Shelley recognized the quasi-mystical forces at work in the creative process, forces that transcend the conscious will of the author (or artist, or musical composer etc). In his essay, “A Defense of Poetry”, Shelley wrote:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, “I will compose poetry.” The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet.

The insistence by Tolkien and Shelley of the transcendent nature of the creative process is crucial to a true understanding of literature and literary criticism. It is, however, the crucial misunderstanding of this transcendence that has led to much of the error in modern criticism. The modern misapprehension springs from the assumption that
the transcendence negates the validity, and therefore the relevance, of the author’s
intention. Since the author’s intention is subject to the mystical power of creativity we
need not take the intention seriously. Furthermore, if the author’s intention is relatively
worthless, so, ultimately, is the author himself, leaving us only with the text. The problem
is that this line of reasoning arises from a misunderstanding of what Tolkien and Shelley
are actually saying. Shelley insists that “the most glorious poetry … is probably a feeble
shadow of the original conceptions of the poet”. In other words, the poet is the original
conceiver of the poem, and the poem a pale shadow of the poet’s conception. The poem
is derived from, and dependent on, the poet. It follows, therefore, that we will better
understand the conception, i.e. the poem, if we better understand the conceiver, i.e. the
poet. T.S. Eliot, in “The Hollow Men”, echoes Shelley:

Between the conception
And the creation …
Falls the Shadow …

Between the potency
And the existence …
Falls the Shadow.

For Eliot, who was on the path to Christianity when he wrote “The Hollow Men”,
the fall of the Shadow was the shadow of the Fall, but, for the atheist poet and the
Christian poet alike, there is a shared understanding that the existence of the work cannot
be separated from the potency that resides in the personhood of the poet. It is for this
reason that Tolkien insists that the author “knows more than any investigator”, even if the
author himself cannot grasp the transcendent mystery at the heart of creativity. If for “investigator” we read “critic”, it can be seen that Tolkien, Shelley and Eliot are insisting that we must understand the solidity of the author and his beliefs before we listen to the opinions and beliefs of the “hollow men”. Even if we accept, as we should, that a great work of literature will have a profundity of meaning beyond the conscious design of the author, we still need to see the transcendent beauty through the prism of the personhood of the author. If we fail to discipline ourselves to follow this critical modus operandi we will see literature through the blurred focus of our own inadequate vision, or through the inadequate vision of a critic. Such an approach does not negate the necessity of employing our own judgment, or of giving consideration to the judgment of critics, but it insists that we should subject our judgment, and that of the critics, to the authorial authority of the person from whom, or through whom, the work was given life. This is the literary litmus test. Any literary criticism that fails to take this test, or fails to pass this test, is unworthy of the name.

Let’s take some practical examples to illustrate the crucial connection between an author and his work. Tolkien could not have written The Lord of the Flies any more than William Golding could have written The Lord of the Rings; Shelley could not, and would not, have written Christian allegorical poems such as Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” or Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence”; Hopkins’s “The Wreck of the Deutschland” could not have existed without the potency of the poet’s deep Christian faith and his grounding in scholastic philosophy. Without knowledge of Dante’s deeply-ingrained Thomistic imagination, it is impossible to understand the depth and design of the Divine Comedy, which is why most modern critics are stuck in the Inferno
and cannot see the value, beauty and profundity of the Purgatorio or the Paradiso. Without knowledge of Chaucer’s orthodox Christian philosophy it would be difficult to see the Christian realist rebuttal of nominalism in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde.

Without knowledge of the tradition-oriented religious faith of Cervantes or Swift, it is likely that Don Quixote and Gulliver’s Travels will be read and understood through the erroneous eyes of the lampooned protagonists rather than through the sagacious eyes of the authors. Without knowledge of Emily Brontë’s deeply held Christian faith, it is tempting to see Wuthering Heights as a sympathetic portrayal of carnal passion rather than as a cautionary tale warning against it. In these instances the crucial philosophical distance between the author and his protagonists is the very key to understanding the deepest meaning of the works.

Without knowledge of Eliot’s sympathy for the political and cultural philosophy of Charles Maurras, his devotion to Dante, and his trajectory towards Christian conversion it is tempting to see “The Waste Land” as an expression of nihilism instead of a condemnation of it. Without knowledge of Tolkien’s insistence that The Lord of the Rings “is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work”, it is likely that we will miss the deep theology that informs the plot. Without Evelyn Waugh’s assertion that the theme of Brideshead Revisited is “the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters”, we would perhaps miss the crucial supernatural character of the novel and see it instead as a romantic tale of (homo)sexual love.

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5 Evelyn Waugh, Preface to the second edition of Brideshead Revisited.
Surely all of these examples are obvious. Surely it requires a mere modicum of common sense to see the truth that one must see the work, first and foremost, through the eyes of the author, as far as this is possible.

As a means of illustrating this point still further, it is perhaps illuminating to compare the study of literature with the study of history. If we insist on studying history through the prejudices and presumptions of our own day we will succeed only in misinterpreting the motives and purpose of historical actions. If we do not know what people believed we will not understand why they behaved and acted as they did. We will not understand what really happened. Our prejudice or our ignorance will have made us blind. In order to understand history we must understand enough to empathise with, even if we don’t sympathise with, the protagonists of the period being studied. And what is true of history is equally true of literature. We must know what the author believed in order to know what he is saying and doing in his work. We must empathise with, even if we don’t sympathise with, the author’s beliefs. Failure to understand the author’s beliefs will lead to a failure to understand the work. Our prejudice or our ignorance will have made us blind. This critical reality was expressed eloquently by T.S. Eliot, writing of his literary hero and mentor, Dante:

You cannot afford to ignore Dante’s philosophical and theological beliefs, or to skip the passages which express them most clearly; but … on the other hand you are not called upon to believe them yourself.\(^6\)

What is true of Dante is equally true of Shakespeare. Once we accept that the author-work nexus is axiomatic to a true understanding of literature, it becomes clear that the more we know about Shakespeare the more we will understand his work. For this

reason, the debate over Shakespeare’s religious beliefs is sending shockwaves through
literature departments around the world. In *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity
in Early Modern England*, Dennis Taylor, Professor of English at Boston College,
discusses the way in which the work of historians was impacting upon the work of
Shakespearian criticism.

In or about 1985, the landscape of Shakespeare and religion studies began to
change. In that year, Ernst Honigmann and Gary Taylor, representing mainline
Shakespeare criticism, argued for the continuing influence of Shakespeare’s
Catholic background on his plays. Since 1985, there has been a flood of criticism
reconsidering Shakespeare’s relation to his Catholic contexts … What we have
seen since 1985 is the widespread acceptance of the importance of Shakespeare’s
Catholic background on both his mother’s and his father’s side, so much so that
Honigmann and Taylor’s 1985 work – and Peter Milward’s *Shakespeare’s
Religious Background* (1973) – are now routinely cited, with various
qualifications, in standard editions and biographies of Shakespeare.7

If Shakespeare was a Catholic, or was greatly influenced by the Catholicism of his
parents and the persecution that surrounded the practice of Catholicism in his day, it
forces us to re-read the plays in an entirely new light. The more that historical evidence
comes to light, the less able are the doyens of post-modernity to do what they like with
the plays. In the past, the lack of knowledge of the personhood of Shakespeare has
enabled critics to treat him as a *tabula rasa* upon which they can write their own
prejudiced agenda. For the proponents of “queer theory” he becomes conveniently

7 Dennis Taylor and David N. Bearegard (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early
homosexual; for secular fundamentalists he is a proto-secularist, ahead of his time; for “post-Christian” agnostics he becomes a prophet of post-modernity. It was all so easy when Shakespeare was a myth, but, now he is emerging as a man, a living person with real beliefs, the distortion becomes more difficult. For “post-modern” Shakespeare scholars the emergence of tangible evidence for the Catholic Shakespeare is not only a challenge but a threat. If he were a Catholic, he becomes irritatingly anti-modern. He would have believed that the practice of homosexuality was a sin, or that the secular state should be subject to the teachings of the Church, or that the religious conformity of the mediaeval past was superior to the post-Reformation fragmentation of Christian belief. From the perspective of the modernist and post-modernist, Shakespeare emerges as an unenlightened and recalcitrant reactionary. From the perspective of tradition-oriented scholars, the evident clarity of moral vision that they had always perceived in the plays becomes more explicable and more clearly defined.

It is not necessary to agree or sympathise with Shakespeare’s Catholicism in order to read his works objectively but it is necessary to understand his philosophical and theological beliefs and to see the plays in the light of their profound influence. There are only two ways of reading Shakespeare, as there are only two ways of reading anyone else. We can read him objectively, by seeing his works through his own eyes, i.e. through the eyes of a Catholic living in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, or we can read him subjectively, seeing his works through the myopia of our own prejudice. Rejecting the fatuousness of the latter, the following chapters are an effort to read the works objectively, seeing through Shakespeare’s eyes.