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HOW TO STUDY A SHAKESPEARE PLAY

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Second Edition

John Peck
and
Martin Coyle

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For Matthew
and
Penny and Steven

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General editors' preface

EVERYBODY who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to this problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literature. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of texts you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not simply convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you and show you how to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck
Martin Coyle

Preface

THE purpose of this book is to provide you with some broad guidelines about how to build a critical approach to a Shakespeare play. The book itself is divided into two parts. Part One is concerned with looking at the basic moves you can make to come to grips with a Shakespeare play: the first chapter explains how best to approach a play and how to begin shaping a critical response. The next three chapters then demonstrate how to construct a critical reading of the text by using a sequence of steps to build your argument. We look at how to tackle a history play, a tragedy and a comedy, in each case offering a number of examples that should allow you to see how the method applies to the particular play or plays you may be studying. After these chapters come two chapters which deal with how to discuss an extract from a Shakespeare play and how to write an essay.

Part One of the book is intended for students who are just getting started in criticism and are unsure about what is involved in studying a Shakespeare play. In Part Two, which is entirely new and appears for the first time in this 'Second Edition', we discuss some of the new approaches to Shakespeare. In recent years there has been a flood of new thinking in literary criticism, and a whole range of new critical approaches have appeared; students at university, in particular, soon become aware of terms such as deconstruction, feminist criticism and New Historicism. Part Two illustrates these new approaches in action, and suggests ways in which you can absorb this new thinking into your own work.

Part Two is at a more difficult level than the first part, and is intended to show you how you can take your studies on a stage further. By the end of the book, therefore, you might find that you are dealing with some unfamiliar ideas, but do try to see that the method is exactly the same as in the first part, that of building an analysis from the evidence in the text. This is because even the most innovatory approaches

are built upon close examination of the words on the page. And this, in essence, is the message of the book as a whole, that criticism starts from the close reading of the text.

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