

Reading List: Being Critical With Shakespeare

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This reading list provides a thorough introduction to the various contemporary critical approaches to Shakespeare that make the field so urgent, thriving and relevant today. It equips students to put those approaches into practice in their own work, and seeks to demonstrate the range and diversity of methods that modern scholarship embraces. Since the emphasis is on method, the list is organised by critical approach (such as sensory studies) rather than by play (such as *Hamlet*), with students encouraged to think how they might go on to apply a method they encounter here to a play they are interested in. The list is therefore particularly suitable for students who already have some familiarity with Shakespeare, and are looking to develop more advanced critical engagements with his plays and poems. This might be at postgraduate level, at advanced undergraduate level, or whilst preparing an undergraduate dissertation on Shakespeare.

Each week introduces a different critical approach, using essays, short 'Element' books and articles (and occasionally a specialised textual edition) from the Cambridge Shakespeare platform. The readings are selected to give students a secure basis for understanding each methodology, but also a sense of the variety that a given approach – such as sensory studies – might result in. Students are encouraged not just to evaluate the arguments being made in the readings, but to consider how they might apply the methods being used and questions being asked to their own critical work. To help with this, prompt questions are supplied each week. The readings draw from the Cambridge Shakespeare platform's varied critical materials: Cambridge Companions; Elements in Shakespeare; *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*; *Shakespeare Survey*, and the multi-modal *Shakespeare's Stages* resource. They also encompass the 'Early Quartos' and 'Shakespeare in Production' series for specialised work on textual and performance studies. The Shakespeare works discussed in the critical readings are available in modern critical editions through the platform; students can thus consult the play-texts themselves in conjunction with the critical readings where helpful.

- Week 1 – Sensory Studies
- Week 2 – Shakespeare and Race
- Week 3 – (Re)sources, Influences and Inter-Texts
- Week 4 – Ecocritical Shakespeares
- Week 5 – Gender and Sexuality
- Week 6 – Textual Studies and Early Modern Publishing
- Week 7 – Early Modern Performance Culture
- Week 8 – Shakespeare in Production
- Week 9 – Adaptation and Reception Studies

Week 1 – Sensory Studies

We begin with sensory studies, a methodology that has reinvigorated Shakespeare criticism in the wake of Bruce R. Smith's generative study *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (1999). Thinking about the embodied sensory experiences encoded in Shakespeare's plays and encountered by audiences of his plays, and considering the challenges of studying the senses at a historical distance of four centuries, methodology is at the core of this week's critical focus. The first reading, by David Lindley, explores Shakespeare's plays for the Blackfriars theatre, examining aural and visual stagecraft including music and masque. Next, Lars Engle's account of sound in *Coriolanus* uses the concepts of 'signal' and 'noise' to think about language and sound in Shakespeare's play through comparison to Augustine's *Confessions*, a widely-read text in the period. Finally, Peter Marx investigates the multi-sensory experience of culture and entertainment in the early modern period through the concept of 'thaumaturgy', the art of making wonder.

Key questions:

- 1) How is sensory experience represented in Shakespeare?
- 2) In what ways do Shakespeare's plays in performance require the audience's senses (beyond comprehending language)?
- 3) How do the critics go about studying historical cultures of sensation, particularly when there are gaps in the evidence?
- 4) Does a sensory approach to Shakespeare offer insights not possible with a narrower textual focus?

Core Critical Reading

Lindley, David, 'Blackfriars, music and masque: theatrical contexts of the last plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays*, edited by Catherine M. S. Alexander (2010), 29-46: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521881784.003>

Engle, Lars, 'Hearing Voices: Signal Versus Urban Noise in *Coriolanus* and Augustine's *Confessions*', *Shakespeare Survey 73: Shakespeare and the City*, edited by Emma Smith (2020), 79-92: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108908023.006>

Marx, Peter W., *Early Modern Media Ecology*, Cambridge Elements in Shakespeare Performance (2024): <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009298148>

Week 2 – Shakespeare and Race

This week maps some of the recent and transformative Shakespeare scholarship drawing on pre-modern race studies and other areas of critical race theory. Presenting race and racialising thought as a consideration for all Shakespeare scholarship, not a self-contained critical conversation, the three readings selected here model intersectional approaches (thinking about class and gender as well as race), think about the performance implications of race-making, and consider hitherto marginalised figures such as Barbary in *Othello*. For students unfamiliar with pre-modern critical race studies, the readings provide extensive contextual information, from the diversity of early modern London's population to the role of travel narratives and new cross-cultural encounters. They also model a range of methods for building considerations of race into Shakespearean scholarship, from detailed engagement with archival traces of real lives lived in early modern London as a frame for reconstructing possible playgoing experiences, to stage practices of blackface performance in non-Anglophone theatrical traditions.

Key questions:

- 1) What are the benefits of an intersectional approach to Shakespeare (attending to identity categories such as gender and class as well as race)?
- 2) What do Shakespeare's plays suggest about the construction of whiteness as a racialised category in early modern England?
- 3) What questions about race-making should we ask when studying Shakespeare performance?
- 4) What questions relating to race and racialised thinking (including the construction of whiteness) can you productively ask when studying any Shakespeare play or poem?

Core Critical Reading

Thompson, Ayanna, 'Did the Concept of Race Exist for Shakespeare and his Contemporaries?', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, edited by Ayanna Thompson (2021), 1–16: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108684750.001>

Sheeha, Iman, "'[A] Maid Called Barbary': *Othello*, Moorish Maidservants and the Black Presence in Early Modern England', *Shakespeare Survey 75: Othello*, edited by Emma Smith (2022), 89–102: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009245845.007>

Heijes, Coen, *Shakespeare, Blackface and Race: Different Perspectives*, Elements in Shakespeare Performance (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108900546>

Week 3 – (Re)sources, Influences and Inter-Texts

Week 3 begins with the study of what John Drakakis has termed 'Shakespeare's Resources': the materials that shaped his writing, and from which he shaped his writing. It introduces methodologies for thinking about where Shakespeare's plays and poems came from, moving beyond traditional 'source study' approaches focused narrowly on plot parallels and verbal echoes. Three critical readings model approaches to this topic. First, Emma Smith and Laurie Maguire's investigation of 'What is a Source?' tracks recent methodological debates about how to conceptualise Shakespeare's engagement with other materials, before putting this into practice to argue that Marlowe and Nashe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* significantly influenced *The Tempest*. Next, Jeff Dolven and Sean Keilen's chapter thinks through what and how Shakespeare read, and the ways in which his experiences may have shaped his staged representations of reading itself. Finally, Lynn Enterline's exploration of how Shakespeare's schoolroom education and reading shaped not only his dramatic craft but his representation of education and pedagogy in his writing provides a wider educational context for Shakespeare's sources and yet another way of thinking about sources and influences.

Key questions:

- 1) What are the strengths and limitations of the concept of a 'source'?
- 2) What kinds of material does Shakespeare draw on, and what does he take from that material?
- 3) How do these critics substantiate their arguments that Shakespeare was influenced by Marlowe/Ovid/early modern classrooms?
- 4) Consider how many different kinds of material (classical poetry; contemporary pamphlets; other plays...) influenced Shakespeare, and how you might go about identifying and engaging with such material yourself

Core Critical Reading

Maguire, Laurie, and Emma Smith, 'What is a Source? Or, How Shakespeare Read his Marlowe', *Shakespeare Survey 68: Shakespeare, Origins and Originality*, edited by Peter Holland (2015), 15–31: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316258736.002>

Dolven, Jeff, and Sean Keilen, 'Shakespeare's Reading', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, edited by Margreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells (2010), 15–30: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521886321.002>

Enterline, Lynn, 'Education and Reading in Shakespeare's Work', in *The Worlds of Shakespeare: Part XII – The Historical William Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith and in association with Katherine Rowe (2016), 845–50: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.109>

Week 4 – Ecocritical Shakespeares

This week we explore some of the ways in which scholars have brought ecocritical approaches (engaged with ecology, environment and climate) to bear on Shakespeare. This includes scholarship concerned primarily with how Shakespeare engaged with and understood his environment, as well as scholarship focused principally on how Shakespeare (as text, performance or both) might contribute to ecological debates and discussions today. Gabriel Egan's essay on 'Country' thinks through Shakespeare's own relationship with urban and rural environments, growing up in the provincial locale of Stratford yet working in London. Megan Elizabeth Allen's article models another ecocritical approach, tracing the significance of Shakespeare to the development of Darwin's ethological writing and arguing for the value of Shakespeare performance as a means of engaging with contemporary ecological debates. Finally, Katherine Steele Brokaw and Elizabeth Freestone's short book thinks through the affordances of Shakespeare performance in a contemporary era of climate emergency.

Key Questions:

- 1) What are some of the similarities and differences between how Shakespeare may have experienced and understood environment and ecology and how we may today?
- 2) How does Shakespeare use rural settings in his plays?
- 3) How and why might Shakespeare contribute to contemporary debates about climate, environment and ecology?
- 4) Identify scenes in Shakespeare's works that you think would respond productively to ecocritical approaches of one kind or another

Core Critical Reading

Egan, Gabriel, 'Country', in *The Worlds of Shakespeare: Part I – Mapping Shakespeare's World*, edited by Bruce R. Smith and in association with Katherine Rowe (2016), 40–45:
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.006>

Allen, Megan Elizabeth, 'Evolutionary Naturalism and Embodied Ecology in Shakespearian Performance (with a Scene from *King John*)', *Shakespeare Survey 71: Re-Creating Shakespeare*, edited by Peter Holland (2018), 147–63:
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108557177.017>

Brokaw, Katherine Steele, and Elizabeth Freestone, *Performing Shakespeare on an Endangered Planet*, Elements in Shakespeare Performance (2025):
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009569613>

Week 5 – Gender and Sexuality

This week turns to the wide array of scholarly approaches concerned with gender, sexuality or both – in Shakespeare's time and today. Three contrasting critical readings give a sense of the range of work engaging such questions: one exploring early modern understandings of sex and gender (including binary and non-binary models); one thinking through contemporary casting choices as sites of embodied Shakespearean meaning-making; and one drawing on concepts developed in queer studies, such as 'camp', to build close readings of Shakespearean texts. Recognising gender and sexuality as topics that scholarship should be habitually attentive to, rather than siloed fields of investigation, as well as recognising the conceptual and theoretical models and approaches developed in gender studies and queer theory that may be of use to Shakespearians, this week's work sketches the outlines of a vast area of study and invites students to engage with its range and diversity.

Key questions:

- 1) How do competing early modern understandings of sex and gender inform your view of Shakespeare's writing?
- 2) Can practices of rewriting (or writing back to) Shakespeare help elucidate the gender dynamics (or queer potentialities) of his works?
- 3) Can Shakespeare contribute usefully to contemporary discussions about gender and sexuality?
- 4) How would you apply the approaches taken and the questions asked in these critical readings to Shakespeare plays you have studied?

Core Critical Reading

Traister, Barbara, 'How the Body Worked', in *The Worlds of Shakespeare: Part XI – Medicine*, edited by Bruce R. Smith and in association with Katherine Rowe (2016), 777–83: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.100>

Cook, Amy, *Shakespearean Futures: Casting the Bodies of Tomorrow on Shakespeare's Stages Today*, Elements in Shakespeare and Performance (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108782951>

Geddes, Louise, 'Taylor Mac's *Gary* and Queer Failure in *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Survey 76: Digital and Virtual Shakespeare*, edited by Emma Smith (2023), 137–49: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009392761.014>

Week 6 – Textual Studies and Early Modern Publishing

This week we turn to the texts that make up ‘Shakespeare’, investigating how they came into being, and how modern editions like those on the Cambridge Shakespeare platform relate to the early texts that have survived. Textual studies has in recent decades moved from a specialised sub-field dominated by editors of Shakespeare’s works, to a mainstream practice that scholars draw upon in work on all aspects of Shakespeare. This week’s work encourages students to take a similar approach, not simply taking for granted the modernised text in front of them as ‘Shakespeare’, but asking what choices have been made to produce that text, and what cultural forces might have shaped its form. The first reading, John Jowett’s essay on ‘Printing, Publishing, Textuality’, sets out the business and organisation of the early modern book-publishing industry, also supplying a concise overview of the different kinds of text in which Shakespeare’s writings survive. It argues for the influence of publishers and playing companies, as well as Shakespeare himself, in the selection and presentation of his plays in print, and thus the form that the surviving texts take. We then turn to a specific play-text discussed in Jowett’s essay, the first quarto of *Hamlet* in Cambridge’s ‘Early Quartos’ series. Finally, Suzanne Gossett and Gordon McMullan’s short ‘practical guide’ to editing early modern drama introduces the foundational concepts and terminology of textual studies, as well as many of the decisions faced by an editor.

Key questions:

- 1) Who, apart from Shakespeare, might influence the form of a play-text as we encounter it in a modern edition such as Cambridge Shakespeare?
- 2) What are the challenges facing an editor of Shakespeare, and how might these challenges be relevant to other researchers, scholars and students?
- 3) How might our understanding of Shakespeare benefit from attending to texts like Q1 *Hamlet* that aren’t generally the basis of modern editions?
- 4) Make a list of text-related questions that you can investigate when studying and writing about Shakespeare

Core Critical Reading

Jowett, John, ‘Introduction’, in *The Worlds of Shakespeare: Part V – Printing, Publishing, Textuality*, edited by Bruce R. Smith and in association with Katherine Rowe (2016), 323–35: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.Q05>

The First Quarto of Hamlet, edited by Kathleen O. Irace, New Cambridge Shakespeare: The Early Quartos (1998): <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316563915>

Gossett, Suzanne, and Gordon McMullan, *Editing an Early Modern Play: A Practical Guide*, Elements in Shakespeare and Text (2026): <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009405607>

Week 7 – Early Modern Performance Culture

The first of three weeks thinking about Shakespearean performance focuses on the early performance culture for which he wrote. A particular consideration is the variety of evidence available when studying the early modern theatre, and the range of methods and approaches that might be applied to that evidence – not limited to traditional theatre history. This week makes use of *Shakespeare's Stages*, an online, multi-modal introduction to the theatres and performance cultures for which Shakespeare wrote. Students are encouraged to read over the full resource, and to spend time with the embedded videos, especially in areas that particularly interest them.

Key questions:

- 1) How do early modern production processes affect your understanding of Shakespeare's plays?
- 2) What kinds of evidence are (and are not) available when studying early theatrical culture?
- 3) Identify moments in Shakespeare plays you are familiar with that would provide particular challenges (or opportunities) when performed in the early modern theatre.

Core Critical Reading

McCarthy, Harry, with Judy Joo-Ae Bae, *Shakespeare's Stages*, Cambridge Shakespeare Editions (2025): <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574709>

Week 8 – Shakespeare in Production

We turn next to the history of Shakespeare performance, across time and place, and up to the present day. The first critical reading, Joseph Roach's 'Production History', introduces readers to the questions that performance scholars might ask of a production, the sources they might work from, and the features of a performance they might attend to. Students and other readers unfamiliar with performance studies will find this in invaluable basis to start from. The next reading is Elizabeth Schafer's extensive production history of *Twelfth Night*, from 1602 to the present day, that appears in her 'Shakespeare in Production' edition of the play, to be read alongside the play itself in the same edition. This case study of a single play – albeit with a particularly extensive performance history – will help illustrate how the approaches and questions modelled in Roach's chapter are put into practice, and help equip students with an understanding of how to write critically about performance for themselves.

Key questions:

- 1) What questions should performance criticism ask, and what aspects of a production should such criticism attend to?
- 2) Can performance criticism help us better understand Shakespeare's plays themselves?
- 3) What are some of the key choices that productions of *Twelfth Night* have to make, and how have these been handled by productions in the past?
- 4) Can you identify changing critical understandings of the play being reflected in production choices over time?

Core Critical Reading

Roach, Joseph, 'Introduction', in *The Worlds of Shakespeare: Part XII – Production History*, edited by Bruce R. Smith and in association with Katherine Rowe (2016), 1545–57: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.Q22>

Twelfth Night, edited by Elizabeth Schafer, Shakespeare in Production (1998):
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511840548>

Schafer, Elizabeth, 'Introduction', in *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare in Production (1998), 1–78: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511840548.003>

Week 9 – Adaptation and Reception Studies

Our final week explores Shakespeare's adaptation and reception through new acts of creativity across media. It thinks about the many forms beyond stage performance that 'Shakespeare' might take, and the boundaries (or indeed the fluidity) between performance and adaptation, between criticism and creativity, and between reception and remaking. Katherine Rowe's introduction to 'Shakespeare and Media History' sketches Shakespeare's significance to a wide range of new technologies as they have emerged in the past two centuries, before turning to crucial questions of how and why one can study Shakespeare's media transformations and adaptation. Peter Kirwan's exploration of tragic environments takes one specific aspect of film Shakespeare to illustrate the creative possibilities of adaptation between media. Finally, Louise Geddes' essay makes a case for a closer integration between creative and critical responses to Shakespeare, exploring contemporary Shakespeare fan culture as one locus for significant Shakespearean reception and afterlife that academia is only beginning to recognise as worthy of attention and study.

Key questions:

- 1) How helpful are Katherine Rowe's 'four principles' for your engagements with Shakespeare adaptations?
- 2) What new creative possibilities for Shakespeare might adaptation into a new medium allow?
- 3) How might creative and critical responses to Shakespeare interrelate?
- 4) What does the history of adaptation suggest about the cultural place of Shakespeare (in different times and places)?

Core Critical Reading

Rowe, Katherine, 'Introduction', in *The Worlds of Shakespeare: Part XXVIII – Shakespeare and Media History*, edited by Bruce R. Smith and in association with Katherine Rowe (2016), 1907–18: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.Q28>

Kirwan, Peter, 'The Environments of Tragedy on Screen: *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, edited by Russell Jackson (2020), 79–91: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108367479.008>

Geddes, Louise, 'Unlearning Shakespeare Studies: Speculative Criticism and the Place of Fan Activism', *Shakespeare Survey 71: Re-Creating Shakespeare*, edited by Peter Holland (2018), 209–20: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108557177.022>