

Cerezo, Marta. 2005:
Critical Approaches to Shakespeare:
Shakespeare for All Time.
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It should be noted, before proceeding any further, that this book is primarily meant to be a textbook or “Unidad Didáctica” for the UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia), and that it is accordingly intended to be of use primarily for UNED students and teachers. It is in fact the equivalent of a Open University textbook and it is suggested explicitly by the author that readers should consider it as complementary information for another UNED publication, *Literatura inglesa hasta el siglo XVII*. However, Marta Cerezo’s *Critical Approaches to Shakespeare* may very well prove most useful *per se*, for most teachers and undergraduate students who may need to confront Shakespeare’s works and Shakespearean criticism for the first time.

This book complies with most of the formal requirements that ought to be expected in a student’s textbook; to wit:

- It includes guidelines for students, with clear declarations of objectives, suggestions for self-assessment and exercises for each section, and abundant bibliographical lists for further reading on the topics discussed.
- Critical ideas and concepts are presented with extreme simplicity and clarity, in a style that will make them accessible and comprehensible to the book’s intended readers; yet the discussion is progressively brought to depths which will also make reading the book a profitable experience for students with a more than elementary acquaintance with Shakespearean studies.
- The topics discussed are relevant for a particular course taught at the UNED, but also, I am sure, for other courses taught in most universities both in Spain and abroad. Moreover, these topics cover aspects of Shakespearean criticism which students may need to know about but teachers fail to discuss in detail due to all-too-familiar time restrictions.

– Finally, the depth and width of the topics discussed denote the author’s outstanding familiarity with the history of Shakespearean criticism. This is particularly noticeable with regards to accuracy and propriety (I have detected no serious blunders, and that is quite an achievement in such a book as this); and an essential requisite to fulfil the principles of simplicity and clarity outlined above.

If there is something to object to this book, it would be necessary to seek, not among its qualitative aspects but among its quantitative. I am pretty sure that students will find its 337 pages too many, perhaps even too heavy for speedy digestion. To more advanced scholars, on the other hand, and in what is only an apparent contradiction, some of the topics are presented too briefly, and may leave them hungering for more. Brevity and extension are in fact the result of incorporating a very wide range of topics; and inevitably some of these are dealt with in less space than they might deserve. As a matter of fact, this *Unidad Didáctica* could be defined as being two books in one, if not three in one; it is divided into two Parts, and it is not difficult to imagine their existence as two separate books, each nicely fulfilling its specific objectives independently. It must be acknowledged that the information provided in each Part does indeed work as a complement to the other, and thus creates a kind of mutual dependence that justifies the book’s current format; but in the end the density of all that information makes it a book for students to read slowly and for teachers to use patiently.

Part One, “Shakespearean Critical History,” occupies pages 15 to 176, and offers a detailed panorama of the history of criticism on Shakespeare from Shakespeare’s own time to our day. It is divided into two Units, the first one (21-60) covering the critical history from Jonson to Tillyard, the second (61-176) focusing on the critical approaches that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. The pattern followed in the organization of both units is the same: both start with an introduction which outlines the aims and objectives; continue with a number of sections describing a specific critical approach and a selection of critical passages from the authors’ works illustrating that specific approach; and conclude with a list of recommended essays and websites, a table of key terms and a number of “self-assessment questions.” The weight of each unit falls, understandably, on the critical sections. In Unit 1, the description is more heavily focused on the contribution of specific critics. Each critic is represented by at least one critical excerpt,

which is in turn introduced by means of a set of “guidelines for comprehension.” These excerpts are very brief, perhaps excessively so. Most of them occupy no more than one paragraph, and in such short space there is hardly any opportunity to illustrate a critic’s view on a specific topic. In this, the book may disappoint readers who would like to see the critics’ opinions more fully represented. On the other hand, one may also hope that the excerpts may encourage those readers to seek the full texts elsewhere.

The situation begins to change somewhat in the second part, where we find longer and increasingly more elaborate sections on early twentieth century critics, though the critical passages continue to be as short. And it will be remarkably more noticeable in Unit 2. As the description advances in time towards the present, so the focus centres on the trends or schools rather than on specific critics, the description of critical approaches progressively increases its depth and detail, and thus their length increases too, to the extent that the section on Gender Studies in Unit 2 occupies over 60 pages, while Jonson’s and Dryden’s Neo-classical criticism is dispatched in a five-page section in Unit 1.

It is understandable that twentieth-century criticism should be given pre-eminence, if only because many of its premises and opinions continue to be valuable and applicable in our analyses to Shakespeare’s work. Moreover, Marta Cerezo has managed to place critics together in their ascription to both specific critical schools and particular topics of interest. So, for example, in the second half of Unit 1, she succeeds in connecting the work of Wilson Knight, Spurgeon and Clemen through their interest in Shakespeare’s use of imagery; and then she offers a rather coherent panorama of the work developed in the first half of the twentieth century by such disparate critics as Granville-Barker and Tillyard. The author’s task in Unit 2 is somewhat facilitated by the existence of recognizable critical schools to which critics could be ascribed, yet at the same time it is made rather more complex by the need to refer not only to Shakespearean critics but also to those who most significantly contributed to the emergence of those schools. So, this Unit 2 starts with Section 2.1, on structuralist criticism which includes a brief description of Saussure’s work before it proceeds to presenting the work done by the “quasi-structuralists” (68) Wilson Knight and L.C. Knight. Then, Section 2.2. discusses post-structuralism and deconstructivism as represented by Derrida in its general outline and by Catherine Belsey

within Shakespearean criticism; and section 2.3, on New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, features Greenblatt, Dollimore, Sinfield, Holderness and Montrose. By far the most complex panorama is covered under Section 2.4, as it is subdivided into a number of sub-sections and sub-sub-sections. Its general title is "Gender Studies," and much of its space is dedicated to the description of the various waves of contemporary feminism and to various feminist critics (2.4.1), from Showalter to Dusi Berre, from Lenz, Green and Neely's *The Woman's Part* to Jardine and Woodbridge; all of it blended with references to Cixous, Irigaray or Kristeva – and followed by a subsection on Feminism and Psychoanalysis (2.4.1.3; 125-144) in which the basic principles of Freudian and Lacanian theories are summed up and illustrated with yet further sub-sections on *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*. After such a plethora of information, one may appreciate the relative brevity and straightforwardness of sub-section 2.4.2, on Gay Studies, with Bray, Goldberg, Smith and Orgel as eminent representatives; and of Section 2.5, on Postcolonial Studies, perhaps too scantily illustrated in its general approach by a lonely Edward Said but well represented within the field of Shakespeare Studies by Looma and Orkin.

After these very long and dense Units, one must still wonder if the list of critics chosen by Marta Cerezo is the appropriate one. The answer to the question is that, considering that Shakespeare is the author most written about in the history of English literature, many critics and some critical approaches are, inevitably, missing in the list. On the other hand, it ought to be acknowledged that those included deserve their place on the pages of *Critical Approaches to Shakespeare*. But I would have appreciated some mention of contributions made by Spanish critics. Our national Shakespeareans have already offered numerous and highly-valuable ideas in a variety of research fields, and therefore a book of this kind could have easily acknowledged the existence of Spanish scholars whose work has added to the richness and variety of Shakespearean criticism.

Part 2 bears the rather misleading title "The Shakespearean Stage: *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*." It is indeed a study of these two plays, done in the same style and with the same dependence on critical approaches as in Part 1; but it has very little on the staging of the plays. The discussion on *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* follows a similar pattern, once again: Unit 3 is for *Hamlet*, Unit 4 for *Macbeth*; and then

each Unit is divided into three sections, the first describing the historical and literary context of the production of text and story, the second reviewing some of the main critical approaches to each play, and the third focused on specific dramatic situations, under the equally misleading title of "Textual Analysis." Strictly speaking, in none of these sections is there hardly anything resembling the approach adopted by critics within the fields of Theatre Studies or Textual Studies; nor is it the author's intent to do so, to be fair. So the matter should perhaps be dealt with as an infelicitous choice of very ambivalent terms.

As regards the Unit on *Hamlet*, it must be noticed once again the admirable clarity with which Marta Cerezo addresses the rather cumbersome matters of dates, early editions and sources of the play. Things gradually acquire more complexity, but no less clarity, in Section 2, "Critical Approaches to Hamlet." Here the author revisits some of the topics and critical opinions presented in Part 1, but this time rearranges them according to specific topics. So, she starts with the question of melancholy and its influence in Hamlet's characterization, which allows her to place together the opinions held by Johnson, Bradley, Eliot or Wilson Knight. Then she moves on to discuss the political interpretations of the play via Belsey and Tennenhouse, and adds some comments on the topic of revenge. Finally, she focuses on issues debated from the point of view of Feminist Studies, with references to Showalter's work on Ophelia – but remarkably, and surprisingly, with hardly any substantial comments on interpretations of the role played by Gertrude. Section 3 seems to offer a more personal approach to specific motifs and situations; or, at any rate, the references to other critics' opinions cease to appear explicitly. Thus, specific subsections are reserved for the topic of metatheatricality, for the role played by the ghost of Hamlet's father, for another discussion of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia, and for a description of "Hamlet's World" or world-view. Thematically, there is not much internal coherence in this section; but, placed together, all these topics may help students get a good picture of what *Hamlet* offers to its readers.

With the Unit on *Macbeth*, the situation differs only slightly. In Section 1, Marta Cerezo includes also a sub-section in which she focuses on the possible interests (mostly, of a political nature) that Macbeth's story might have had for Shakespeare's early-seventeenth-century contemporaries. And in Sections 2 and 3 she

inclines somewhat too steeply towards considerations regarding imagery. So, Bradley and, above all, Wilson Knight are naturally brought in; but then also Janet Adelman's feminist approach and Sinfield's political interpretation of the play are regarded in association with, and to a certain extent are subordinated to, Shakespeare's use of imagery. This is even more noticeable in Section 3, which the author explicitly remarks is "devoted to the central themes and images" in the play (296), and where the matter of imagery is further expanded, this time evincing a higher degree of dependence on what other critics (mostly Cleanth Brooks; more marginally, Spurgeon, Braunmuller and Bullough) have said. All in all, as the emphasis falls so heavily on a stylistic feature and not so much on the dramatic situations, my personal impression is that the discussion in this Unit is comparatively less satisfactory than that in Unit 3, though by no means unsuitable for students willing to tackle the complexities of *Macbeth*.

After reading the book, the reader is left with the feeling that time has been well and profitably spent. It is true that there is little new in it for specialised scholars, as it is mostly a compilation of mainstream critical opinions with which one is (or should be) quite familiar; but as most specialists are also academics in search for suitable bibliographical sources to offer to their students, they will find that Marta Cerezo's *Critical Approaches to Shakespeare: Shakespeare for All Time* is a very welcome addition to their students' recommended reading list.