

MACMILLAN HOW TO STUDY

JOHN PECK AND MARTIN COYLE

HOW TO STUDY

A SHAKESPEARE PLAY

SECOND EDITION

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HOW TO STUDY A SHAKESPEARE PLAY

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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Part One

How to approach a Shakespeare play

What problems am I likely to encounter when I study Shakespeare for the first time?

SHAKESPEARE is often the first dramatist people study. You might have read, seen, and even acted in plays, but Shakespeare could well be the first writer whose plays you are expected to analyse and discuss. Consequently, when you start to study Shakespeare you might have little idea about what you are supposed to look for or say. You might sense that criticism must amount to something more than just retelling the story, but nobody expects you to have an instinctive awareness of how to discuss a play. The principal aim of this book is to provide the kind of guidance you are likely to need, showing you how to make an appropriate and valid response.

There is, however, a problem that precedes this question of how to discuss a play. This is the basic problem of reading the text. You will not be alone if you find it very difficult just trying to follow the story of a Shakespeare play. Part of the problem is the language: you will have to read a great many speeches, mainly in verse, where the characters seem to be saying far more, and in a far more peculiar way, than if they were involved in similar situations in real life. The language is not only old-fashioned but also complex and dense. The meaning of much of what is said is likely to escape you. Coming to terms with Shakespeare must obviously include coming to terms with his language, but at the outset the best tactic is to slide over the speeches you do not understand, ignoring the difficulties. Concentrate on trying to follow the action on the simple basis of who is involved and what happens next. Indeed, reading a Shakespeare play for the first time, it is a considerable achievement if you can grasp the broad outline of the story, even if there are many parts of the play that you cannot understand and even if you have no idea of the significance of what you have read.

Following and understanding the story of a play does, however, become a lot easier if you have some ideas about what you might or should be looking for. In other words, knowing something about how to make a critical response can actually help you in your initial reading of a play.

How do I start to shape a critical response?

We must stress that the way of studying Shakespeare described in this book is only one of many possible approaches. One approach, for example, is to produce and act the play as a group, so that the play begins to make sense from the experience of performing it. This is a way of approaching the play from the inside, but such an approach is not always possible or practical. What we are more concerned with is how, as an individual, you can develop your own ideas about a play, and the best starting-point for this is probably from the outside, with some ideas about drama in general. What we mean by this is seeing how much all plays have in common, in terms of both structure and theme. Shakespeare is obviously an uniquely gifted writer, but if we know what he has in common with other dramatists this will give us something solid to hold on to which can help shape our response. Our starting-point, therefore, is the shared conventions of drama.

What does Shakespeare have in common with other dramatists?

All plays by all dramatists have a great deal in common. This becomes apparent if we consider the structure of a play, or even the structure of an episode from a television series. Every play can be said to fall into three stages, generally referred to as exposition, complication and resolution. The play begins with the exposition stage, where we are introduced to the characters and the situation they find themselves in. At the outset the characters might not seem to have any particular problems, but there would not be much to interest us if we were simply confronted with characters who were living happily, continued to live happily, and lived happily ever after. Very soon, often in the first scene, a problem develops: something happens which looks as if it is going to disrupt the characters' lives. One way of putting this is to say that a kind of order prevails at the beginning of the play but that very soon this ordered life is thrown into disarray.

The central and longest stage of a play is the complication stage. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can provide an illustration of what happens here. In *Romeo and Juliet* there are two families, the Montagues and Capulets, who are sworn enemies. There are brawls between the members of the two families, but for the most part there is an uneasy calm so long as they keep their distance. But then Romeo, a Montague, falls in love with Juliet, a Capulet, and so a complication has arisen. The consequence is that the established state of affairs that exists at the opening of the play breaks down, and we get a long sequence of scenes in which social disorder takes over, with family set against family, and child against parent. What Shakespeare is looking at are those human passions, feelings and instincts that make life complicated. In doing this he does what all dramatists do: he takes a situation where things are relatively peaceful at the outset, but then shows how the actions of people disrupt that established social order. If we think about a conventional detective series on television we find a similar pattern: characters are going about their normal business when a crime takes place. Often the crime is violent: what we see are the anti-social tendencies of certain characters shaking the established order of society. A detective series presents this disruption of order in extreme and simple terms, in that the villains are obviously acting in an unacceptable manner, but the dramatist does not have to present overly anti-social behaviour. As in *Romeo and Juliet*, he or she can present natural instincts in people that challenge, or react against, the pressures and expectations of the society in which they live. Nor does the dramatist have to treat subjects seriously: comedy, for example, can present an irrational quality in people that undermines any possibility of a rational order in society. In all plays, however, what happens is that the behaviour of the characters creates confusion and social disarray.

This leads us on to the third stage in a play, the resolution stage. In a detective series, the crime is solved, the villains are brought to justice, and a sense of social order is reassuringly re-established at the end of the episode. Stage plays can end as neatly as this, particularly comedies, but often the ending of the play is far less tidy. Sometimes, for example, as in tragedy, the social order is so thoroughly destroyed that civilised behaviour yields to violence, and the play ends with the death of the principal characters. The situation is thus in a way resolved, but what we are principally left with is an impression of the precariousness of the whole idea of social order.

What we hope has become clear here is that not only do all plays follow the same structure of exposition, complication and resolution, but also that, at least in the broadest terms, all plays have a lot in common thematically. Plays deal with threats to or disruption of the established order of society. That might sound very abstract, but what makes plays interesting is that they present these problems in human terms: they present and explore the experiences of characters caught in problematic situations brought about by their own or other people's behaviour.

How can I make use of what I now know about plays in general?

We have argued that in all plays we see some threat to or disruption of the established order of society. Passions, instincts, forces, and feelings are unleashed that undermine any established order. Such ideas are, however, only valuable if you can start making use of them to help you in your reading of specific plays. One immediate use of these ideas is that they can help you follow the story of a Shakespeare play when you are reading it for the first time. You know that at the outset you will be introduced to various characters and that soon a problem will begin to define itself. Some act, or series of acts, will take place that alters the way of life that has existed. During the course of the play things will become more and more chaotic, so that by the central point of the play life will have become completely topsy-turvy. At the end, however, things will sort themselves out in some way: order might be re-established, or there might be a feeling of temporary peace and taking stock of what has happened, but it could be that the chain of events leads to the death of one or more of the characters. If you know that this is the standard pattern of a Shakespeare play you then have a framework which can help you see the shape of the story in the particular play you are studying. Whole sections of the play might continue to baffle you, but the thing to do in a first reading is to ignore the complications and look for the broad pattern in the text.

These general ideas about drama do not, however, just help you follow the story of a play. They can also provide a framework for your entire critical analysis of a play. A common mistake students make is that they put a tremendous effort into studying every aspect of a play, so that they are able to comment in detail on every character, every scene, and every theme, but all too often they fail to see the play as a

whole. They fail to see how everything holds together. The point we are making is that, if you can see the broad pattern of the text, you have a framework which can help you make sense of and interpret every local complication and detail. In the simplest terms, it can be argued that every play is built upon a tension between an idea of order and the reality of disorder in society. If you can grasp this, you have a framework for making sense of every detail in the play – the actions that take place, the characters, their speeches, the language used, and the range of themes explored – for every detail must reflect the tension between the idea of order and the reality of social disorder.

Isn't this approach too simple?

The advice given here might seem limiting, for we seem to be saying that plays always deal with the same issues. And to some extent they do, for they deal with those problems that affect us all as human beings who have to live with other human beings. We must all be aware that we live in a world that is far from peaceful and ordered. There are always tensions, disagreements and conflicts that create discord, yet the aspiration towards a better state of affairs is one that most people share. What the dramatist does is to explore and re-explore this perennial problem that confronts humanity. While the broad pattern in all plays might be the same, however, it is developed and presented in a different way in every play. The general ideas outlined so far should help you get a purchase on a play, but for the most part criticism is concerned with the particular way in which the issues are developed in a specific play. What we are saying is that the broad significance of a play is easy to see – how plays are concerned with the reality of living in a disordered world where people's unruly instincts repeatedly create discord – but the real skill in criticism lies in seeing how this theme is brought to life and made distinctive in the play you are studying. It is to this question of how to start building a full critical response that we turn now.

What should I be trying to do in a critical response?

This is a summary of the critical method illustrated in the following chapters. The first step, as already discussed, is **look for the broad**

pattern of the play. Look for the action or actions that trigger off the complications of the play: almost invariably one of the characters acts in a headstrong, or foolish, or ill-conceived, or possibly evil way. The act that takes place creates discord; the alteration in the established state of affairs throws life into disarray. Order yields to disorder. The greater part of the play will then be devoted to presenting scenes in which people are at odds with each other, and in which conflicts and disagreements or confusion and misunderstandings dominate. As the following chapters on histories, tragedies and comedies show, these initial moves which enable you to get a hold on a play are likely to prove even more productive if you **have some ideas about the particular characteristics of the kind of play you are studying.** If you know what to look for in a tragedy, for example, you can make additional advances in getting hold of the pattern of the play you are concerned with.

So far, however, your critical analysis is relying on the assumptions you can bring to a play. This means that you are likely to be stressing what the play has in common with plays in general and other plays of its kind. **The real task of criticism, however, is to capture the distinctive qualities of the play you are studying.** You want to explore and convey something of the unique nature of this play. A sense of what is special about a play will, in fact, begin to become clear the moment you **start looking in more detail at the plot.** The danger here is that you might lapse into just retelling the story. What you have to remember is that you are not only interested in what happens but also in the significance of what happens. There are, fortunately, two fairly straightforward ways of organising and disciplining your discussion of the plot. One is to remember that the general framework we have used, which helps you see the overall pattern of the story, can also be used as a key to help you interpret any part of the story. This means that you always have at hand a way of commenting on the significance of what is happening. The other point to bear in mind is that if you attempt to discuss too many scenes you are likely to lapse into merely summarising the action without commenting on its significance. It is far better to **concentrate on a few scenes**, working on the assumption that those scenes on their own are bound to tell you a lot about the play as a whole. To illustrate these points: you might have chosen a scene from around the middle of one of Shakespeare's plays. As you start to describe what is happening you are putting together a set of perhaps rather confused impressions. What can help you

organise these impressions is if you call upon the idea that the scene is presenting a picture of social disorder, as it inevitably will be. But your abstract idea will come to life as a result of describing concrete and specific details in the scene. Remember, though, that a play is likely to maintain a constant tension between order and disorder. Look for evidence that the characters feel there is something wrong with the disorderly state of affairs: implicit in every scene will be the idea that life should be more orderly and rational, even though it is in the nature of people to disrupt harmony. As you use these large controlling ideas to illuminate small areas of the text you will begin to move towards a sense of what is distinctive about a particular play.

Our critical method has so far gone through two steps: it starts with ideas about plays in general, and then, on the basis of analysis of a few scenes, moves towards a sense of what a particular play is about. But there is more to a play than the overall significance and meaning of the plot, and as you look at individual scenes you are likely to be noticing a number of things of interest. It helps if you are aware of the kind of **things you can focus on**. The six areas of interest in a play were first listed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle: these are **plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle**. What we have been talking about so far is the significance that can be found in the plot, but in studying a play your attention is also likely to be caught by the other elements Aristotle mentions (with the exception of music: music is important in some of Shakespeare's plays, but it is not of primary importance in his work as a whole). You are bound to respond to the characters, and if you analyse a scene, as suggested above, you will almost inevitably find yourself talking about them. The problem with talking about characters, however, is that you might just have a vague, ill-defined feeling that they are interesting or complex. What you need is a way of focusing and disciplining your impressions, and again the large ideas we have been working with provide a way of organising your response. It can be shown how **the main characters are caught between opposite impulses**, how they are attracted by an idea of orderly and reasonable behaviour yet often find themselves acting illogically and irrationally. The broad pattern of the plot reproduces itself in the experiences and personalities of the major characters, so that there is a constant tension both in the play as a whole and in the central characters between orderly and disorderly behaviour. It can also be shown that the minor characters play an important dramatic function in this pattern, as they often serve to comment on or draw

attention to the gap between how things ought to be in an orderly world and the disorderly state of affairs that prevails in the play.

The same tension is reflected in the language of a play (the element Aristotle refers to as diction), where **images of order are constantly set against images of disorder**, and in the thought of a play, which we more commonly refer to as a play's themes. All manner of themes can be identified in a Shakespeare play, but they can all be said to come under the more general heading of a tension between order and disorder. In addition, what we see on the stage, the spectacle, will reflect the same tension, for the action will either be violent or chaotic, or more disciplined and organised. In the chapters that follow we discuss these elements of drama as and when they seem appropriate for discussion, mixing them in with our broader comments on the plot, but we also make the point that a critical response can concentrate on one element if you want to construct a more rigorous scrutiny of one aspect of a play.

This discussion of how to construct a critical response is obviously very abstract, but the method should become easy to understand in the following chapters as we discuss specific plays. We do hope, though, that our main point has come across, which is that a few simple controlling ideas – primarily the idea that plays are built around a tension between social order and social disorder – can provide a key to interpreting the whole of a play, and that if you combine these large ideas with close attention to specific details of the text you should be able to capture and express what is special and distinctive about any individual play.

What, if anything, is Shakespeare trying to say in his plays?

As Shakespeare returns again and again to passions that disrupt social order it might be felt that he writes with the intention of warning people against acting in an anti-social or unruly way. We want to stress as strongly as possible that this is an inadequate view: good literature never carries this kind of simple message about how people should behave. What, then, is the purpose of the plays? Well, it is something more indirect than a purpose. Shakespeare is exploring the reality of human experience, the way in which people do act. He is making us aware of how society is complex because people are complex; of how individual instincts and passions disturb any ideal of a harmonious society. He does not write to condemn unruly instincts, but rather to explore both

the good and bad qualities in human nature. He is concerned to ask questions about how we can or should behave in such a complex world, rather than to offer any answers. At the end of a play we do not come away with a message but with an increased awareness of the problems and choices and difficulties that humanity has to face up to.

What distinguishes Shakespeare from other dramatists?

We have stressed how much all plays have in common. They focus on the realities and problems of living in a disordered world. But, if this is the pattern of all drama, what distinguishes Shakespeare from other dramatists? The answer must be that the plays present a fuller and more complex sense of the nature of experience than all other writers. But how do they do this? It is tempting to start talking about Shakespeare's genius and the quality of his mind, but these are vague and unhelpful terms. Every element in the plays is, of course, important, but the really special thing about Shakespeare is his language. It seems a silly thing to say, but Shakespeare is the greatest writer because he writes so much better than anyone else. One aspect of this is that every speech carries a tremendous weight of meaning. This is one reason why the speeches can prove hard to take in when we are first reading a play, as the characters are not simply saying things that advance the action but constantly raising all the larger questions implicit in the play about the whole relationship between a harmonious vision of life and the messy reality of experience. The effect of this is that every Shakespeare play seems to raise fundamental questions about the whole nature and meaning of life. It is this that makes Shakespeare's plays difficult and demanding, for they always raise more issues than any single reader can ever fully comprehend. Yet, even if we cannot hope to grasp a Shakespeare play in its entirety, this very richness of the speeches can help us when studying the plays, for whatever speech we turn to can be guaranteed to be raising many of the questions raised in the play as a whole.

Why does Shakespeare write in verse?

The answer students most frequently give to this question is that it was the convention, that most dramatists wrote in verse at this time (around

1600). There has, however, got to be a better answer than this, an answer which manages to connect Shakespeare's choice of method with the content of his plays. What we have stressed so far is that behind the plots and characters of Shakespeare's plays is a level of larger significance in which questions are being raised about the whole nature of life in society. Writing in verse is, in fact, in itself an effective way of forcing these larger questions on to our attention. We are confronted with an action sufficiently stylised to be not just a mirror image of life, but something at a tangent to real life, so that we do not simply become absorbed in the action but realise that there is a larger pattern of significance inherent in the play. But it goes further than this. Poetry is highly ordered language: when Shakespeare writes in verse his lines are usually in blank verse – that is, unrhymed lines, each line containing ten syllables. This ordered quality of poetry relates to the issues we have been discussing, for not only is there always a tension between the idea of order and the reality of disorder in the content of the plays; this tension is also in evidence in the form of the speeches. Time and time again it is the case that in an ordered verse form a character will be talking about the disorder of experience. There is thus, in Shakespeare's preference for verse, a constant tension between the desire for neatness, symmetry and order and the awareness that life itself always burgeons out of control. Consequently we can argue that the preference for writing in verse is at one with the thematic substance of the plays, for verse raises the same questions about order and lack of order in life. Shakespeare does not, however, always write in verse: there are often scenes and speeches in the plays where he obviously feels prose is more appropriate. Our general ideas should again help us explain this: presumably at such moments we are closer to the mundane reality of life where order and disorder jostle together. We are closer to the daily shambles of experience, and, for the moment, any more inspiring vision of order in life has been eclipsed.

What we have explained so far is Shakespeare's overall preference for verse, but we also want to stress one of the particular ways in which his verse works, the way in which it allows him to concentrate a great deal of meaning into a few lines. We can make the point most clearly if we refer to Hamlet's most famous soliloquy:

To be, or not to be – that is the question;
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? . . .

(*Hamlet*, III.i.56–60)

Hamlet is debating with himself whether to commit suicide. His life is full of problems and troubles, and Shakespeare uses warfare and sea images to help clarify and make vivid Hamlet's dilemma. But the use of imagery (words from one area of experience or life to describe another area of experience) also adds to and complicates the meaning of the lines. Hamlet's 'troubles' are only his personal feelings of unhappiness, but, by associating his feelings with such large and chaotic subjects as warfare and the sea, the individual experience is linked with vast aspects of life. Within the space of a few lines Shakespeare thus manages to incorporate questions and concerns that go beyond the stated subject matter, with the result that the speech is not just about Hamlet's feelings but becomes a huge statement about the whole nature of life in a giddy, disordered world. We get the impression that Shakespeare is not just dealing with the immediate situation but with the whole complex nature of life.

This soliloquy, and the way in which it works, sums up much of what we have been talking about so far. We can see how it focuses on the disorder that erupts in Hamlet's life, and on his baffled response, his uncertainty how to act. We can see how Shakespeare is doing more than just telling the story of one person, how he is raising questions about life in general, and that the most effective way of doing this is through the use of verse, often because, as here, the imagery manages to extend and broaden the issues involved. But the method of analysis we have employed is also important: we moved from our general ideas to discussion of a particular passage from the play. This is always the most productive approach: using a few, simple controlling ideas, but then focusing on details which can give a more precise and more vivid idea of what the play is about and how it works.

Isn't this becoming too complicated? Wasn't Shakespeare essentially a working playwright who wrote enjoyable plays to entertain people?

Some people argue that the academic way of looking at Shakespeare gets it wrong, that it places too much emphasis on the ideas and language of the plays, and loses sight of how well his plays work as thea-

trical entertainments, and of the marvellous parts he creates for actors. And certainly it is very important to try to appreciate how the plays work on the stage. But it is also the case that any appreciation of the theatrical qualities of any play has to be based upon and must follow on from some understanding of what the play is about. Otherwise, we can end up knowing a great deal about how a play might be performed without understanding the logic behind the performance. In the pages that follow we have therefore tried to relate any discussion of staging to a discussion of meaning in the plays. Nevertheless it is true that this book is intended principally for those of you who are studying Shakespeare for examinations, and the sort of things we say reflect the kind of emphasis there is in examination questions on Shakespeare. The system as it exists is far more likely to ask you to talk closely about a speech than to discuss a production of a play you have seen, and the direction this book takes simply reflects and responds to that state of affairs.

Do I need to know anything about Shakespeare's life and times?

Our whole emphasis has been on the productiveness of working with a few general ideas and then turning to specific scenes and speeches. But can it all be done this way? Isn't it necessary to know something about Shakespeare's life and the period in which he wrote? One of these questions we can provide a very short answer to: you do not need to know anything about Shakespeare the man behind the plays. Stories about Shakespeare's life might be interesting, but they will not help you understand the plays.

Knowing about the times in which Shakespeare wrote, however, is useful, although the amount of information you need is very small indeed. Shakespeare was writing around 1600 in an era that is sometimes referred to as the Renaissance period. This period sees a major cultural shift as the medieval world yields to the modern world, resulting in an extraordinary flood of great literature. There is a shift from an essentially religious world view to an essentially secular world view as a new sort of dynamic society based on trade and commerce comes into existence. A central aspect of this change is that people came to feel that they were living in a less familiar, somewhat more disturbing world. The medieval period offered people a secure image of a divine order in the universe: there were problems, of course, but the world

seemed both well ordered and comprehensible. This gives way, very slowly, to a less stable, less confident world view. Shakespeare's acute sense of the disorderly nature of experience could be said to be due to his instinctive feel for what was happening. Throughout Shakespeare's plays there is a sense of a traditional order that is being torn apart. The people upsetting things are often characters of a certain kind: they are self-interested and ambitious. The plays thus reveal a sense of a new spirit of individualism which is in conflict with the traditional religious order. Individuals are increasingly presuming to take the initiative in a world where it used to be the case that everyone knew their place and trusted in God.

Where do I go from here?

This chapter has concentrated on the assumptions and ideas you can bring to your reading of Shakespeare. We have said a little about how you can construct a full critical response to a play, but the usefulness of such comments is obviously limited in the absence of examples. It is in the next three chapters that we turn to discussing specific plays. It might well be that we fail to discuss the Shakespeare play or plays that you are studying, but try to see how these chapters are concerned with showing you how to construct a reading, rather than with providing you with full analyses of plays. We suggest a sequence of steps for looking at a play, and the same sequence is repeated with every play we consider. The method of analysis itself is most fully discussed in the analysis of *Richard II* which appears in the next chapter, and you might find it useful to read this, even if you are not studying a history play, as it spells out the technique for studying a play. The principal thing the three central chapters of this book attempt to do is to illustrate this systematic approach, but we do provide some additional pointers about what you might want to look for in certain plays.

The way to use these chapters is to take as much or as little from them as you want to. The most important thing is to read and reread a play so that you really know it well: this repeated reading of a play will teach you more about it than any teacher or critical book such as this can do. The next three chapters might, however, help you organise and discipline a response. What we say is obviously far from everything that can be said about Shakespeare: if you have ideas of your own it is important that you express them. Criticism would be a very drab affair

if everybody read books in the same way and found the same things in them: what will make your criticism personal and worthwhile is if you have the courage to develop your own insights.

So, it is a case of reading the play, and then working on the play – taking what you want from this and other books and from your teachers, but also developing your own ideas. In the study of literature, however, more than in the study of any other subject, the way in which you express your views is as important as the views themselves, and in chapters 5 and 6 of this book we focus on how to write essays and answer examination questions on Shakespeare. The advantage of having a good essay-writing technique is that it not only enables you to develop your own work on the text, it also helps you begin to take on more advanced critical ideas. This is something we turn to in the second part of the book, where we look at new approaches to Shakespeare and apply them to some of the plays discussed in the next three chapters. The intention is to show how the same method of analysis will serve you well at all levels in your work on Shakespeare.