

Professor Stephanie Shirilan
Syracuse University
ENG 340 Shakespeare in the Age of Covid-19

Assignment 1: Close Reading Essay. Due no later than March 20th by email. Earlier submissions encouraged and will be returned in order received.

In 2-3 pages, present a close reading of one of the productions we've studied so far. Focus your analysis on one or a set of formal features or elements, showing how your close attention to these generates unexpected critical insights about the production and/or its reception and interpretation.

A close reading paper argues for a particular interpretation of a text. It aims to convince by demonstrating the value of its analysis – its salience, sensitivity, logic. It show *how* you interpret a text and why this interpretation matters.

How to write a close reading of a Covid-era Shakespeare production:

There are myriad formal elements and features you might choose to write about in these productions. We have considered some of the more standard generic formal features of film and film adaptation: setting, scenery, costuming, casting, sound, music, camerawork, etc. [we will add to this list in class this week and next]

We have also remarked the formal features taking shape as recognizable conventions of the genre: Zoom tiles, chat functions, and other devices that foreground the technological mediation of the production; green screens...[again, let's flesh out this list as review and in discussion this week and next]

Your papers should demonstrate how paying close attention to the use of one or several of these features generates unexpected critical insights about the production and its reception.

If you've never written a close reading paper, see the links below. I recommend the notice and focus technique. Brainstorm your impressions. Re-watch or listen to the production, if you can. You can work from the general to the specific, asking yourself: what strikes you as critically noteworthy, suggestive, strange, or unexpected about the production as a whole? What formal features or elements can you point to that produce this effect? Or you can try the inverse approach: note the formal features that seem particularly striking or strange. Ask yourself: what makes them so? How might they serve as occasions for thinking about larger themes and concerns that animate the production or its contexts?

Q&A

What productions can I write about? How do I write about a play I can't access or a recording of?

You can write about any production we've studied. All but one of the productions we've examined so far are available as recordings that you can consult as you work. If you're writing about *Sharon n Barry* you will need to work from memory (this is conventional when writing about live performance).

Do I have to write about Covid?

Your paper need not focus directly or exclusively on Covid as context, but your analyses should anticipate the reader's consciousness of these conditions and engage accordingly.

Do I have to read the play I'm writing about?

No (not for this assignment), but if you are focusing on questions of fidelity to Shakespeare's text or close reading the language, plot, characterization, or other details that pertain at least as much to Shakespeare's text as to the adaptation it would serve you, at least, to work with the relevant passages and cite that evidence in your discussion.

General Rules:

Be as specific as you can or need to be to support your arguments and analyses. Do more with less.

Close readings should be logically coherent and consistent. They should "make sense" and be persuasive both in their local context and in the broader contextual frames your reader might be inclined to test them against.

Good writing is purposeful and seeks to be understood. Ask yourself what your purpose is in writing this essay. Does your argument matter to you? How/why might it matter to others? Ensure that your writing is, at minimum, readable. Aim to use language, structure, and style that communicates and elevates your argument, makes it more persuasive and provocative!

[we may add more out of discussion, especially as we write our class rubric!]

Recommended sites on close reading:

<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-do-close-reading>

https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/reading_lit.html

<https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/andmonsters/files/2015/01/Strategies-for-Close-Reading.pdf>