

Multiple Choices

Interpreting Henry V

Adrian Beard teaches at Newcastle University and is a Chief examiner for A Level English Literature. He co-edits the Intertext series and has recently written *Language Change* in that series.

Adrian Beard discusses issues of textual interpretation at A Level, with reference to Henry V, and suggests ways that teachers and students can approach Shakespeare to make the most of AO4.

In my time as a chief examiner at A Level English Literature, the aspect that has caused us all the biggest problem is AO4, or in short, multiple interpretations of texts.

The reason we have multiple interpretations of texts as a requirement of A Level study (and to an extent GCSE Literature too) is because the study of literature has evolved and developed over the last fifty years or so. Read Peter Barry's excellent book *Beginning Theory* and you will see how many different critical 'schools' exist. This variety of critical approaches and emphases means that nowadays, to put it crudely, there are two ways to approach the study of literature. One is to be an adherent of a critical position or method (for instance Marxism or Ecocriticism) and to apply the method to the study of literary (and often other) texts. The second way is to owe allegiance to no particular method yourself, but to be aware that various methods exist and to see the readings of a text through a range of approaches that are possible.

Deconstructing AO4

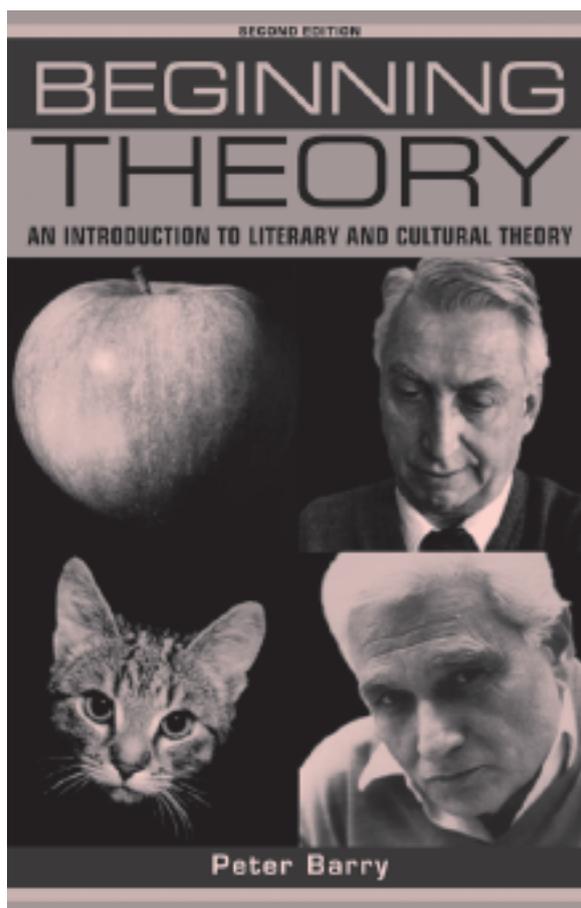
A Level students, it would appear from the official wording (see below) are expected to belong to the latter group, at least to the extent that they must show an awareness of other views as well as holding their own. AO4 for A Level English Literature requires candidates to *articulate independent opinions and judgements,*

informed by different interpretations of literary texts by other readers

Meanwhile in GCSE English Literature there is also a reference to alternative interpretations. This time, though, the idea does not stand alone but is yoked to linguistic analysis. AO2 for GCSE English Literature requires candidates to *explore how language, structure and forms contribute to the meanings of texts, considering different approaches to texts and alternative interpretations.*

There does not seem to be any great consistency between the way multiple interpretations are officially described for us here. At GCSE we begin with reference to linguistic analysis then move on to 'different approaches' and 'alternative interpretations' - a close linguistic focus may indeed contribute to multiple interpretations, but there are other possible routes too. Meanwhile at A Level, multiple interpretations have an objective to themselves, but it is all rather woolly. Is an opinion that is not a judgement worth having at all? In an ideal world it would help us all if the three areas in AOs 3,4,5 could be merged into a single statement of intent. It makes most sense to me

if literary texts are analysed for their methods and their contexts; in which case possible multiple readings are bound to emerge. In coursework we can and should manipulate things to make this happen. In external examinations it becomes more problematic.



Doing interpretation

Let me declare straight away, though, that I am very much in favour of the idea that students begin to understand that texts are not fixed in their meanings. Taught effectively, the weighing up of different interpretations is a definite step forward in what it should mean to study literature. There are various ways in which different interpretations can be accessed. For the sake of this article I have Shakespeare in mind for AS students. Here are some of the ways:

- Published criticism is presented to students - but be careful. Most critical material will not have been written with A Level students in mind.
- Students find their own critical material - but again be careful. The internet can be a wonderful tool, but it has a lot of garbage on it. Teaching students how to evaluate internet sites, though, would be a great idea.
- Class discussion is 'recorded' and evaluated. This has the advantage of allowing students' judgements to be valued and challenged.
- Students are taught about some different theoretical 'positions' and then invited to apply them to the text under discussion. Some teachers worry that this is too hard for AS, but experience shows this can be an effective method.
- Because we are dealing with a play, we can access a performance. Performance here can refer to stage or film, usually seen as video in the classroom. For this to work, students need to know what they are looking for in advance, what different interpretations of the written text are possible. The danger here is that they describe what they see, rather than analyse the interpretation. That is why they need to be prepared in advance.

Assessing interpretation

If we now move on to assessment, it becomes rather more complex, often because AO4 is being assessed with a specific numerical weighting. If we start with coursework, then we have the ideal circumstances for the assessment of AO4. Teachers are free to choose their own texts, and their own areas of focus. They can teach the skills and knowledge that they know will be assessed, because they themselves are setting the task. For some teachers, though, it has proved quite hard to come up with tasks which genuinely make students consider at least two interpretations of an aspect of a play. Old habits die hard, and old question formats keep re-appearing.

Not all of them work very well:

- *How far do you agree with the view that our true sympathies should be reserved for Ophelia?* raises various issues: do you have to agree at all? What are true sympathies? Can we sympathise with one character only? Doesn't it depend upon how the part is played? A task which asks students to look at the text and uncover possibilities would work better, such as *How do different characters in the play talk about Ophelia? What dramatic/critical issues are raised by their comments?*
- *To what extent do the first two scenes of Hamlet prepare us for the rest of the play?* proves very hard to argue against! How about instead: *What dramatic/critical issues are raised in the first two scenes of the play? To what extent are they resolved by the end?*
- *Do you consider that Venice and Belmont are the opposite of each other or that the characters that inhabit them share similar attitudes and values?* holds potential but is flawed as it stands. Perhaps the need for comparison was a hang-over from GCSE, but students struggled with this, not least because some characters inhabit both places. Some students clearly did not agree with either premise but were worried about saying so. A task which went something like the following would have worked better: *Belmont has been seen as both an idyllic place, and as morally corrupt. What issues are raised by Shakespeare's presentation of Belmont?*

There are, though, limitations on the amount of coursework allowed, and AO4 has to also be assessed in external examinations. This has not proved easy. One way this has been done is by the sort of questioning which goes something like: *Desdemona is a saint. Desdemona is a whore. Which is right?* A question like this sends out all the wrong signals to students, suggesting that characters are real, that reading involves binary opposites, that different interpretations are a sort of foreplay before deciding the right answer. Even the more subtle forms of exam questioning still betray the central problem that the question-setters have: they cannot refer to any specific theoretical position, or to any specific critic in any detail, because they do not know whether all candidates have studied them. The resolution of this, as often as not, is the made-up quotation, or the generalised reference to 'some readers...'.

Understanding interpretation

So, what really lies behind this assessment objective, and how can teachers approach it practically? As I see it the

following principals lie behind AO4. They should underpin the ways in which A Level literature is taught, and students should be aware of them:

- as readers we are influenced by our own experiences, actual or imagined, and our cultural background affects the ways in which we interpret such experience. This means that we bring to our reading of texts personal attitudes and values which have been forged in a cultural context
- texts do not reflect an external reality - they are representations of the world, representations which embody attitudes and values
different types of texts require different types of reading
- literary texts are not fixed in their meanings, so ambiguity and uncertainty are central to the reading of texts. This should liberate teachers and students from the need to feel that they are searching for a 'right' answer
- there are different ways of looking at texts based on particular approaches and theories. These theories are often complex and use specialist terminology, but at the same time it is possible to have a broad sense of how they work
- there will be significant differences in the way literary texts are understood by different individuals and social groups and at different times

Although these are not presented in a hierarchical order, there does need to be a health warning with the last bullet point. While we need to acknowledge that texts have been understood differently over time, we are often not in a position at A Level to find the historical sources that will provide the necessary detail. We must not, therefore invoke fake history to do the job for us. The 'Elizabethans were all racists' approach to Othello will not do. They weren't all racists by any means, even if we can apply a modern concept like racism to a previous age. And in any case why should we think all Elizabethans felt the same but see ourselves as more diverse?

Interpreting Henry V

So how do we put these ideas into practice? I shall use as an example the opening scene of *Henry V*, which it would be useful for you to read alongside this article. I am assuming that the play will be taught for coursework, with all that that implies - no need to study the whole text at the same pace, no need to explain every reference

etc. It is important to recognise, though, that when choosing a Shakespeare play, you are inevitably choosing some avenues of enquiry. So, *Henry V* will involve looking at aspects of political power, for example, whereas *Much Ado About Nothing* is far more likely to open up questions about personal relationships. I am not saying that these texts involve single issues, but I am urging careful thought about which text most suits your students' interests and abilities.

The first thing we always need to be aware of is the type of text we are studying. This is a play, a text that we are reading, but which was written to be performed. This means that we will be approaching the text with a crucial difference from Theatre Studies. While they are looking to 'perform' the text, we are looking at ways in which the text could be performed - this may seem like splitting hairs, but it is a crucial difference. Our job is to look at the text and find different possibilities. We can then turn to actual performances to see which of those possibilities, or others we had not thought of, are brought out in any particular production.

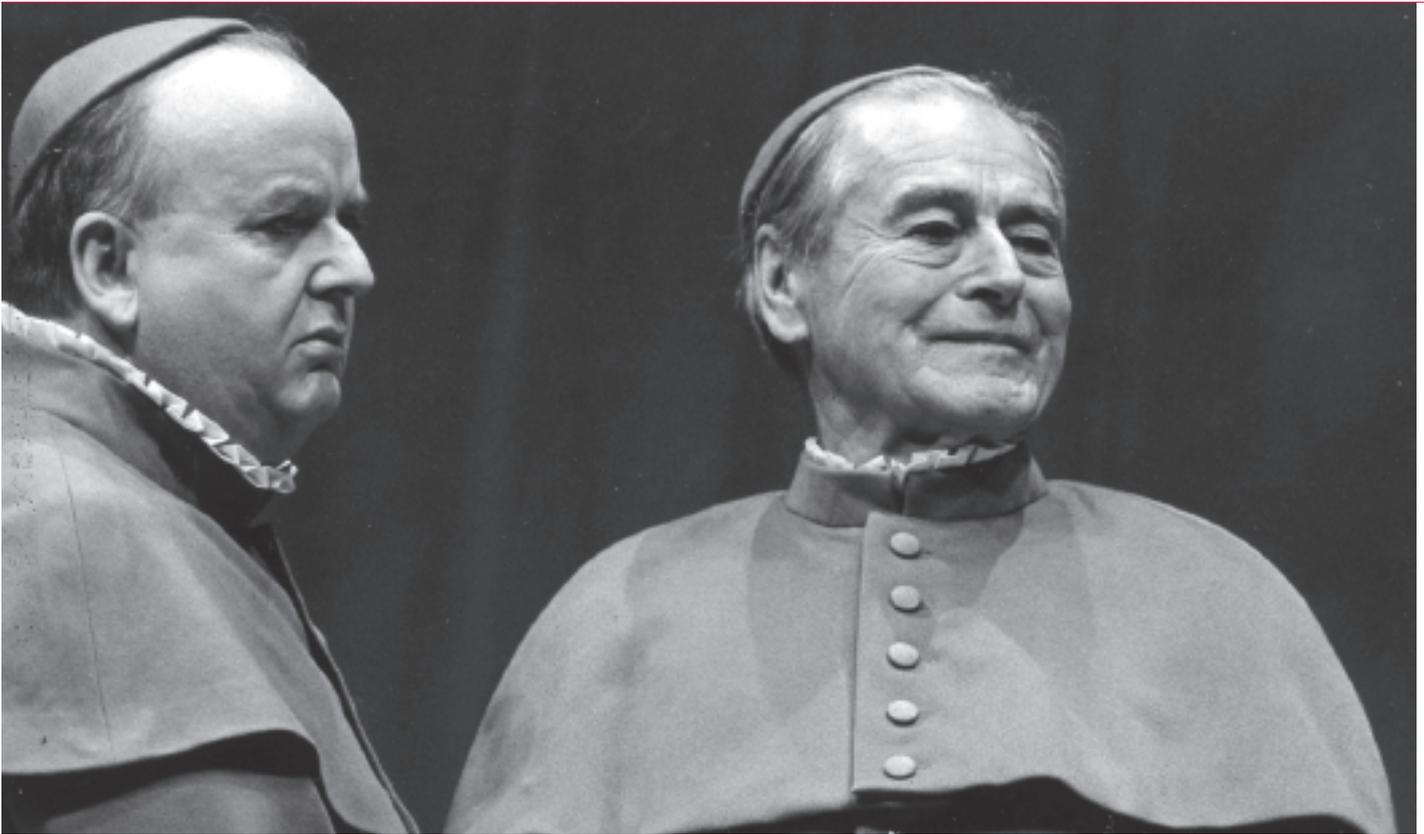
Reading the scene

If we turn to Act 1 scene 1 we already have some contextual issues to consider which arise from the text itself. The first is that this play's eponymous character has appeared in previous plays, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*. Students will be familiar enough with texts that are in series, and how an audience requires information about what has happened earlier to be embedded in each new episode. In addition to this we have also had a Choric scene before the play as such begins. This Chorus figure has largely urged us to use our imaginations in viewing the play, but that is not quite all: in referring to 'the warlike Harry' assuming 'the port of Mars' we have had established for us the idea that we are meant to endorse this king's actions. We are already being pushed into an interpretative position, although we can always resist this

First of all we need to read/hear the text, and although as English teachers we can do this reasonably effectively in our heads, most students cannot. A sound recording of the text can be effective here. Students also need a broad understanding of the surface meaning of the text, so why not give it to them in advance of hearing the text? Remember too how daunting some heavily annotated editions of the texts can be. Do they really help at this level?

Here are the bare bones of this scene without any specific 'interpretation'. Two senior churchmen, Canterbury and Ely, in attendance at the royal palace, talk about the following:

- there is a proposal afoot to take from the church a large amount of land
- King Henry is the key to whether this land will be taken away
- King Henry is a religious man now but this was not always the case
- They cannot work out whether the king is on their side with this issue



Henry V Royal Shakespeare Theatre 1984 (Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-Upon-Avon, Joe Cocks Studio Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust)

- Canterbury tells Ely that he has already suggested to Henry that even more money could be gained for the crown by conquering France

Reading for dramatic purpose

The first thing I would explore here would be the dramatic nature of this scene. In terms of action, it is static, two men talking. As is usual with Shakespeare, he represents us as listening to a conversation that has already started, so we have to focus hard on information that is not given to us directly. There are two possible reasons for this obliqueness; one is dramatic authenticity, the other is the portrayal of men who are unwilling to declare their real motives, even to each other.

The way he unfolds the conversation allows Shakespeare to 'introduce' a character before he is seen - again a typical feature of his plays. Here we are briefly told about the 'old' Henry (whom we might know about if we saw the previous episode) and in great detail the 'new' one. In the world of the play Canterbury appears to be telling Ely what he already knows, but all stage talk is ultimately designed to inform the external audience, those watching the play. The scene ends with a looking forward to what is to come next - the churchmen are to meet with Henry, which will be followed by Henry meeting the French Ambassador.

Reading for detail

Next I would look at the text in more detail. Whatever interpretations we come up with here, we need to support them with details from the original text. In

addition, perhaps, we could look at a critical source, which could be, for example, a published critical text, but could also be ideas raised by a contextual awareness of critical possibilities.

I have already mentioned that one of the things I noticed when considering the dramatic shape of this scene was the amount of detail it contained, when both men seemed to know most of it already. There are various types of detail, nearly all given by the senior of the two churchmen, Canterbury. An article of this size does not allow me to look at them all, so let's look at the following only, spoken by Canterbury. He is referring to the parliamentary bill which will take away church land:

*If it pass against us,
We lose the better half of our possession:
For all the temporal lands which men devout
By testament have given to the church
Would they strip from us; being valued thus:
As much as would maintain, to the king's honour,
Full fifteen earls and fifteen hundred knights,
Six thousand and two hundred good esquires;
And, to relief of lazars and weak age,
Of indigent faint souls past corporal toil,
A hundred almshouses right well supplied;
And to the coffers of the king beside,
A thousand pounds by the year: thus runs the bill.*

Interpreting the text

What Canterbury provides here is a list of what will be lost: land which would be enough to maintain a huge number of earls etc loyal to the king. It is here that I

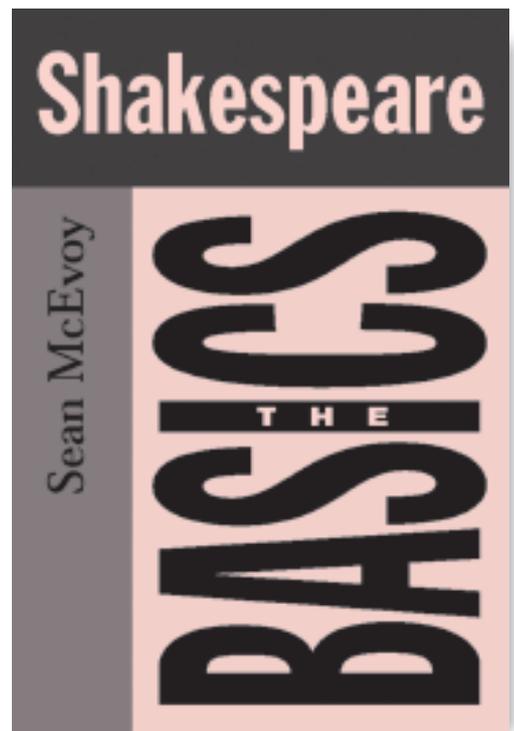
would want to remind my students that there is a world inside the play, in which Canterbury has motives, a world outside where Shakespeare has motives, and then a world in which we are studying the play. As for Canterbury, there are at least two possible ways to see him here - genuinely religious and upset at the loss of church property, or, more likely, a political player looking after his own power base. Shakespeare meanwhile has added a significant detail. One of the uses that this land could be put to is to provide care for lepers and beggars in almshouses - the implication seeming to be that such things are currently not on offer. In other words the churchmen are arguing against the relief of poverty. And so, as a reader I see a world of power politics where apparent religious concerns mask the hypocrisy of power groups and their self interest.

And if we now look at the scene as a whole we see two churchmen hoping to legitimise a war on a foreign country as a means of ensuring that their own power base is kept intact. It would be too simplistic to draw absolute parallels with the current position in Iraq, but most students would be able to see that there are clear connections, and that Shakespeare, 'has something interesting to say about modern politics and the political role of the theatre' as Sean McEvoy says in his brilliant book *Shakespeare The Basics*. It would be difficult to stage this play in Britain at the moment without playing these clerics as devious figures, out for their own self-interest while pretending the interest of the church and its beliefs. Reference to earlier versions via video of film might show a different emphasis though.

Then as we move on to the rest of the play, we want to see how Henry manages these churchmen. Does he do what they want? (Yes!) Does he see through their motives? (Yes!) Does he manipulate them as much as they think they manipulate him? (Yes!) What does this tell us about power and responsibility?

Beyond Curriculum 2000

So, as part of coursework, I would be asking students to explore the issues around power and responsibility that are raised by Henry's meetings with the churchmen and



the French ambassador. Such a question is much harder, though, if done under timed conditions without the text at hand. Many of the changes made to A Level Literature in 2000 were long overdue, but they are hampered by the assessment requirements which surround them. Reading requirements are too prescriptive in terms of time and genre; limitations on open book are unhelpful; coursework is undervalued; the Assessment Objective weightings are too much like a numerical formula which must be completed exactly. It would be nice to think that Tomlinson will open up enough freedom for teachers and students to fully engage with critical ideas. But I'm not banking on it.

References:

- Barry, P. (2002) *Beginning Theory*, Manchester:University Press
 McEvoy, S. (2000) *Shakespeare The Basics*, Routledge

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