Shakespeare's Characters

Reading Exercise 1.2 Contexts for Close Analysis

Part A due Wednesday, September 12 in class Part B due Monday, September 17, at 9:15 am. by e-mail

Close analysis should never mean myopia. In order to be plausible and persuasive, close analysis must always have contexts: it must take into account the contexts of the object analyzed, and it must situate itself within the context of a larger conversation. Hence, our unit on close analysis will introduce some primary and secondary sources. Below are several such texts relevant to characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For the purposes of this course, primary sources are those contemporary with subject matter with which you are dealing, as well as the subject matter itself. Secondary sources are those that discuss the subject matter or its historical context. Different disciplines have different definitions of primary and secondary sources.

Part "A" (due 9/15 IN CLASS)

Quickly read (i.e. thoroughly SKIM) all five of the secondary sources listed below. Be prepared to summarize each, orally, in no more few sentences, in class (30 seconds to 2 minutes or so). You should be able to give the following information if I call on you: what source does or accomplishes, or what questions it seeks to address, as well as the thesis (if the source in question has a single thesis, and what kind of evidence the source uses. (Example: "This article might be useful to an inquiry about the play's representation of the relationship between Theseus and the rude mechanicals or the fairies, insofar as it uses close readings of passages from several plays to examine the tensions between the Elizabethan monarchy and the Elizabethan theater. It argues that the Elizabethan stage was ultimately a threat, as well as a boon, to monarchical power.") You may bring notes if you wish.

To do this portion of the exercise with reasonable dispatch, you might focus first on section or chapter headings, introductions, conclusions, beginnings of paragraphs; these will give you a sense of the broad argument or arrangement of information; then glance at some of the middle paragraphs, as well as the middles of paragraphs to see if there is anything you have missed and to get a sense of the evidence presented. Sometimes you may need to look beyond these.

Now do the same thing with the primary sources, and (again) be prepared to summarize each, orally, if I call on you.

The purpose of this exercise is to begin developing your skimming skills, so that you can see the
difference between surveying material and close-reading text. The skills are very different, but in many ways they are interdependent.

Part "B" (Due 9/19 10:00 P.M. by E-Mall)

Next, pick one or two of the secondary sources—or even PORTIONS of one or two of the secondary sources—of interest to you as you prepare to write about the character you have selected. At this point, you should also look at the primary sources for passages of interest. **Print out these snippets, read them carefully, and make sure you bring them to class.** The portions may be as short or as long as you wish, but you must have enough knowledge of the context from which they come to use them without distorting their meaning. If they support or articulate theses how might they be of interest to your own thinking about the character you have chosen? If the purpose of the selections, and the texts from which they come, is solely to convey information, how might the information be valuable to your line of inquiry? If a passage from a primary source is of interest, how does the evidence it supplies help your examination of your character?

**Now, in a well-focused paragraph of 200-250 words, describe the material that you find relevant in such a way as to explain how it might be useful in framing the analysis of one passage from the playtext—preferably a passage you are planning to use in your discussion of the character you have selected.**

REMEMBER, THE PURPOSE OF THE READING BELOW IS TO HELP YOU FRAME YOUR ANALYSIS OF PASSAGES FROM *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*, NOT TO SUBSTITUTE FOR IT. IN YOUR ESSAY PROPER, YOU SHOULD END UP QUOTING FAR LESS FROM THE SECONDARY AND PRIMARY SOURCES YOU CHOOSE THAN FROM THE PLAY ITSELF. YOU ARE REALLY USING THE SECONDARY SOURCES TO HELP YOU FORMULATE YOUR ARGUMENT ABOUT THE TEXT. THAT SAID, ONE OR MORE OF THEM MAY TURN OUT TO BE VITAL IN CREATING A CONTEXT (AND AN AGENDA) FOR YOUR ARGUMENT. That is why I am asking you to confine your writing about these sources to a paragraph—a well-focused paragraph.

**Secondary Sources:**

**Primary Sources** (please note that the documents from *The Elizabethan Stage* are themselves excerpted by E.K. Chambers, who abridges them and intersperses the actual documents with summaries of what he has abridged. Make sure you know what is being summarized and what is being quoted if you yourself decide to quote any of the material in your essay):
- Excerpt from the *Acte for the punishment of Vacabondes and for Releif of the Poore & Impotent*
- Excerpt from the Act of the London City Council banning playing within the city limits (1574)
- Excerpts from late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century texts supporting or attacking the theater
- Excerpt from Philip Stubbes’s hostile description of festivities of misrule relating to *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*
- Excerpts from Elizabethan and Jacobean texts relating to gender as it is represented in the play