

(Mis)interpretation and performative misfires: Autistic communication in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

Jessica Olley

Key definitions

‘Autistic Presence’ - the distinct, visible, and irreducible material/embodied presence of autistic people. - Professor Stuart Murray

Neuroqueer (v): the practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously - Dr Nick Walker

Goals

- Much research around autism and autistic speech focuses on 'giving voice'. While this research can be valuable, my project suggests that autistic people already have voices — we are simply misunderstood by dominant frameworks of reading and listening.
- Installing neurodivergent modes of expression and interpretation into critical theory, this project aims to spotlight the rhetorical and critical value of autistic language.

The trouble with symptomatic reading:

- The role of the critic is to “rewrite…the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code” (Jameson, 60)
- Through symptomatic reading “texts are shaped by questions they do not themselves pose, and contain symptoms that help interpreters articulate those questions, which lie outside texts as their absent causes” (Best and Marcus, 5).
- In asserting that “what a text means lies in what it does not say” (Emily Apter, 1), symptomatic readers continually assume that the text cannot simply say what it means.

Marginalized viewpoints: Gaps & Lacks

- “If the void is a woman’s fullest measure, she drags everything along in her loss.” (Luce Irigaray,1983, 111).
- As Sonya Freeman Loftis argues, the cultural understanding of autism stems from a “perceived lack of human subjectivity” (64).
- Symptomatic reading can therefore be viewed as critically destructive when applied to marginalised language. Further, I argue that it reveals the mechanisms of autistic marginalisation.

Introducing Coriolanus

- **Sensory difference** – He shows obsessive focus on cleanliness, anxiety around noise and crowds. Autistic individuals often exhibit atypical responses across all modalities, including taste, touch, audition, smell, and vision (Jason He, 2).

- **Moral distress** – He is anxious about exaggerated or hyperbolic language, alluding to a moral rigidity that is common in those with autism (Cho et al., 204).
- **Communicative difference** – Despite clear grammar, Coriolanus is consistently misinterpreted, reflecting impaired social communication, a defining feature of Autism Spectrum Disorder (Michelle Lee et al., 2128).

Weaponized symptomatic reading

Coriolanus: “He that will give good words to thee will flatter/Beneath abhorring” (1.1, 164-165)

Sicinius: “Was ever a man so proud as is this Martius?” (1.1, 250)



Interpretation at face value

“Listen, and let me explain. Accept my explanation” (Woman, aged 56)

“Take my interactions at face value and work with the default assumption I am honest and well-intentional, not that there is a hidden meaning to anything I say, or that I am deliberately rude or [I] think badly of them if I don’t react the way they necessarily expect,” (Man, aged 28) - (page 837)

- Cook et al, 2024.

Sensory difference & Surface reading

“May these instruments which/you profane/Never sound more! When drums and trumpets shall/I’ the’ field prove flatterers, let courts and cities/ be Made of all false-faced soothing” (1.9, 43-47)

“More cruel to your good report than grateful/ To us that give you truly.” (1.9, 50-51).

Language, performativity, and the world

“Insofar as ontological agency is threatened by sustained acts of misrecognition of our [autistic people’s] distinctiveness in relation to any other person who has ever lived, we may experience a sense of loneliness that our actions are unable to contribute to a shared world” (Lucas 210-211)

Surface/depths

Surface readers argue that “we replace the symptom, which depends on the contrast between surface and depth, with a constellation of multiple surfaces understood as concealing nothing” (Best and Marcus, 9)

In reading multiple surface/depths, we reposition the surface of the text as a point at which profound knowing and recognition of the other can occur — moving away from constructions of the surface that view it as superficial artifice.

Neuroqueering

“I have nightly since

Dreamt of encounters ‘twixt thyself and me —

We have been down together in my sleep,

Unbuckling helms, fisting each other’s throat —

And waked half dead with nothing” (4.5, 121-126)

Aufidius’ “interest in Martius is not as a general…or as a representative of Rome, but as an unmediated body” (Kamarilli, 114)

He is “seduced by exactly what he wants: recognition of his true self through the honesty of his bodily prowess.” (Kamarilli, 114)

Conclusion

Symptomatic reading would require us to dig our nails in, but when it comes to *Coriolanus* it is more critically valuable to reach out and feel the surface of the text.



“Listening closely… and being willing to catch what the other actually says…if we can learn to do that with books, we might learn to do that with people” (17)