Explication Checklist

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Explication is a method designed to connect the ideas of a poem or a passage with the poetic devices that convey those ideas. A good analyst ought to be able, especially with a short passage, to account for the contribution of every line, perhaps even every significant word. The following list of suggestions is offered as a guide, not a set of iron-clad rules. It is not comprehensive, nor is every recommendation invariably helpful. The following topics and questions are useful for poems and poetic drama in general, but Shakespearean texts seem especially hospitable to them. [This useful checklist appeared in the magazine *Shakespeare*, which is now defunct. *Shakespeare's* target appeared to be secondary education teachers. Junior and senior high school students and first and second year undergraduates should find this checklist quite helpful. I encouraged my students to use it after they undertook the plot and characterization and as they were conducting close analysis and readings of particular passages.]

1. Read the passage for meaning. Pay attention to the sentence, not the line, as the principal unit of organization. Find the subject and verb. Forget, for the moment, about the poetry.

2. Try to summarize the main idea or ideas. (Do this in writing: having to commit conclusions to paper forces you to decide what you think.)

3. Outline the progression of ideas, identifying major sections. Is there a clear system of organization? Are there antitheses (there usually are in Shakespeare)? repetitions? indirections?

4. What is the specific and general context? How does context (speaker, situation) modify the speech? How does the passage contribute to the scene? to the play at large?

5. Is irony a factor? Is there, in other words, a discrepancy between the character's words and meanings? Might this irony be unconscious? Or is the character consciously lying?

6. Identify the major and minor themes of the speech. How do these modify or support the general themes of the play?

7. How does the passage elucidate the character or the speaker? or those of other characters, off- or onstage?

8. What is the speaker's attitude toward the subject? toward the hearers? toward him- or herself? In other words, what is the tone?

9. Examine the diction of the passage. After reading for denotation (straightforward meaning), think about connotation. Look up important words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to determine their currency in the Renaissance and to discover implied significance. Notice connections among roots of words, as well as alternative or archaic (but still applicable) meanings.

10. Think about wordplay, remembering that puns need not be funny. Consider multiple senses of words.

11. Notice the imagery. Is it particularly abundant? noticeably sparse? Do the images suggest patterns or form clusters? How do the images promote or clarify the subject?

12. What about the figurative language: similes, metaphors, and symbols? Analyze metaphors with an eye on both tenor (the thing being described) and vehicle (the thing used to describe it), and ponder the connotations of the comparison.

13. Are there classical, biblical, or historical allusions? What do they contribute?

14. Do you find understatement, hyperbole, personification, paradox?

15. Study the syntax, the arrangement of words into sentences. Is word order normal or inverted? Do sentences seem simple or complex?

16. Does punctuation affect meaning? (Be careful with this one, since Renaissance punctuation is irregular and often added by editors.)

17. Examine meter as you have syntax. Is it regular or not? Look for run-on lines or important instances of caesura.

18. Pay attention to musical devices such as alliteration, rhyme, assonance, consonance, euphony, cacophony, onomatopoeia. Don't belabor these unless they are meaningful.

19. Disregard any of the above as you see fit, but do not disregard number

20. For every device, the essential question is "how does it work?"