Explication / Close Reading Exercises

If you’re unfamiliar with the skills of close reading or “explication,” I recommend the following series of exercises in developing ideas for your paper:

1. **Make an enlarged photocopy** of the passage(s) you’ve decided to analyze. *Do not type out the passage yourself* as it is very likely that you will probably make a few errors in punctuation or words which will end up distorting your analysis. Leave sizable blank margins around the passage so that you have room to write comments and questions.

2. If you haven’t **photocopied extended notes from the Norton or Riverside Shakespeare** or another scholarly edition, be sure to have those on hand before proceeding. Those notes will probably save you a fair bit of time, but remember also not to feel completely limited by them. Extended notes will often offer you a “gloss” or interpretation of difficult lines, but it is likely that other interpretations are possible. Use those notes as a guide and a starting place, but not as the final word on the meaning of the text.

3. Treat the passage as though it is a poem (even if it happens to be written in prose). Begin by trying to **break down the passage into units of 4-8 lines each** (approximately). Each unit should reflect a complete thought within the passage. Often the editor of a play will indicate the end of a passage with a period (as opposed to a semi-colon, comma or colon), but try to use the logic of the sentences to figure this out; sometimes a break will occur in the middle of a line (as in line 9 below). Mark each section clearly by drawing in a bracket in the left-hand margin, as shown below in this passage from Act 1 scene 1 of *Henry IV, Part 1*.

   So shaken as we are, so wan with care,
   Find we a time for frightened peace to pant  
   **And breathe short-winded accents of new broils**
   To be commenced in stronds afar remote.
   No more the thirsty entrance of this soil
   **Shall daub her lips with her own children’s blood:**
   No more shall trenching war channel her fields,
   Nor bruise her flow’rets with the armed hoofs
   Of hostile pages. Those opposed eyes
   Which, like the meteors of a troubled heaven,
   Did lately meet in the intestine shock
   **And furious close of civil butchery.**
   Shall now in mutual well-beseeming ranks
   March all one way and be no more opposed
   Against acquaintance, kindred, and allies.

4. **Paraphrase each section**, either on the actual sheet of paper or on a separate sheet of paper. In some cases it may be difficult to paraphrase the basic meaning simply because the syntax is complicated, or because two meanings may be possible. Go ahead and write those down. As you continue to work through the meaning of the passage, you will probably be able to clarify the paraphrased meaning. In short, here Henry is proposing that England take up a crusade as a way of recovering from the violence of recent civil war, but also as way of reuniting the kingdom.

5. **Look for moments of intensity**: in other words, look for lines, phrases, metaphors that strike you as especially unusual, dramatic, difficult, surprising -- ones that seem to leap off the page, even if you’re not entirely sure why the lines strike you in this way. The lines above in “bold” are the ones I would choose, although other lines might appeal to other readers. These lines are often the most difficult to paraphrase, but they will almost always yield the most interesting analysis; rather than avoiding them, which is understandably the first temptation, focus on them, work them over carefully to see what various meanings they might suggest.
6. **Note all similes and metaphors** in the passage, perhaps by highlighting them or circling them. Look to see if there is a pattern in those figures of speech. For example, in the passage above I have underlined words that relate to the body -- either parts of the body (lips, intestine, eyes), bodily actions or sensations (pant, thirsty, march), or actions upon the body (bruise, butchery). It is important to recognize that the body is the most prevalent metaphor in the passage and that Shakespeare uses it as a complicated metaphor to discuss several topics: combat, civil war, national identity, violence, King Henry’s political vulnerability, military discipline, the structure of the heavens. There are additional recurring motifs relating to the landscape (stronds, soil, trenching, fields, flow’rets), and the cosmos (meteors, heaven) -- sometimes these are combined or layered to create an even more complicated image. For example, in describing civil war, lines 5-6 offer a rather shocking image of the English landscape swallowing the blood of her own children, a cannibalistic image which also evokes the more sacred, ceremonial possibility of drinking Christ’s blood (which we can connect to later lines in the passage about Christ’s wounds). The term “flow’rets” (suggesting young, tender flowers) can be connected back to the “children” of line 6, since both refer to the vulnerable youth of England who are wounded or sacrificed in civil war.

7. **Refer to concepts discussed in lecture and readings:** Political theories about “the king’s two bodies” are particularly relevant here. When King Henry says, “So shaken as we are, so wan with care,” he is referring to his own physical sense of vulnerability and exhaustion (the king’s natural body), but this weakened condition extends also to the entire state (the king’s royal body). Philosophical models of microcosm and macrocosm allow us to interpret the references to the body and to the heavens in lines 9-11; the violent costs of civil war are expressed through metaphors of the body, the landscape, and the heavens in a mutually reinforcing fashion.

8. **Look for contradictions, tensions, paradoxes:** the opening lines suggest an important contradiction or tension, which is that even though the king and the nation (both signified by the royal “we”) are clearly weakened and vulnerable, Henry has decided that they are nonetheless fit to take up a new crusade to the Holy Lands. The fact that his decision to take up a military engagement is founded on faulty logic is a pattern that we will see again at the beginning of Henry V, suggesting that military leaders may use a rhetoric which, on the surface, insists on warfare as necessary and logical, even when those justifications for going to war are clearly weak ones. In examining contradictions and paradoxes, try to examine why Shakespeare is trying to suggest two meanings at once; look at whether or not that tension or paradox is resolved at some point later on in the drama.

9. **Consider character development:** examine whether or not this passage marks a significant shift in the development of the character speaking. How does the passage contrast with earlier or later passages on a similar topic? Is he or she working deliberately to accomplish a change in his or her identity? Or trying to avoid a necessary stage in maturation? What are the reasons for that character to attempt to change or to resist transformation? In the above passage we can see King Henry desperately trying to change the political climate of the nation by uniting the different warring factions into a single army, which is also an attempt to legitimize his own kingly authority. However, since he helped to depose and execute his predecessor, King Richard II, he is going to find it very hard to restore stability to a political system he himself has undermined. In more personal terms, Henry also needs to go on this crusade to cleanse himself of the sin of having deposed a divinely appointed king, which adds to the urgency of his rhetoric.

10. **Situate in relation to the rest of the scene and the play:** look at the scenes just before and after the passage you have chosen. Even if those scenes address a different plot in the play or a different set of characters, what parallels can you draw between them? These are the opening lines of Henry IV, Part I, but we can refer to historical events represented in the prior play, as in item #9 above. The fact that Henry’s plan here is immediately postponed by reports of further civil conflict means that his graphic description or prior internal battles will also anticipate what is to come in the rest of the play.