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Social Context

Social Contexting

Frances E. Dolan
President, SAA 2004–5

The usefulness of the word context has always been, for me, the double connotation of "con," suggesting both texts one reads with and against other texts, and the reminder that we access the social through texts that pose the same interpretive challenges as Shakespeare's plays. However wide we cast the net for those texts to be read with and against Shakespeare's texts—to include fabrics, codpiece points, ink stands, pamphlets, ballads, depositions, recipes, and legal statutes—they demand and reward the same tactics of analysis we turn on Shakespeare's plays, even as they also challenge us to be more agile and resourceful critics. Thinking about a Shakespeare play in relation to other kinds of evidence has never meant ignoring or disparaging all of the ways in which a play is different from a muster roll or a will. Quite the opposite. To examine the many different forms with which early modern people engaged is to see what sophisticated and labile readers and writers they were and the very particular resources each kind offered them. Only by placing plays in relation to others within their class as well as in relation to other kinds of evidence entirely can we interrogate the operations of form, the persistence (and sometimes repurposing) of some ideas, practices, values, fears,

and things, the transformation of others, and the emergence of the new. Placing variously situated texts in debates or contestations, we can test hypotheses about processes of change, cycles of return, throbs of resonance, webs of association. Our agency in that placing and testing—in context as a verb rather than a noun—is what will ultimately concern me here.

However much disparaged, a distinction between text and context insistently reasserts itself. Yet we have also developed a more supple language for discussing the participation of plays in making the social. Critics describe texts as actors in networks, ecologies, constellations, assemblages, and affinities. All of these terms suggest a span across space and time, a patchwork rather than a line; they helpfully shift our gaze away from the author's intention (and individuation). Refusing to see the Shakespeare text as the origin or the target, network models emphasize, diffuse, and sometimes mystify the agency of various actors, including texts. In part because of the weightiness of "Shakespeare" and in part because of the privileging of what seems the indisputably literary, the Shakespearean text can throw an ecology out of whack because it remains so challenging to articulate exactly how it relates to the other actors in a given network or what its "literariness" contributes to its agency. Rita Felski points to certain works' "dexterity in generating attachments" ("Context Stinks!" 2011). Generating attachments as well as hogging the limelight and setting the agenda, the Shakespeare play can sometimes seem to be an actor-manager, an impresario, a ham.

While we can never nail down exactly how it pulls this off, puzzling over that power requires thinking the Shakespeare play in relation. But attending to the "social contexts" of Shakespeare plays does not mean assembling materials, issues, or events as much as it means raising a series of questions about the cultural embeddedness of literary invention. Why tell this story in this way at this time? What other versions of this story were in circulation? What were the materials available from which Shakespeare constructed his story? What were the functions of particular fictions? That is, how did they manage the social conflicts they engaged? What, if anything, distinguishes Shakespeare's versions of popular stories from others? In placing a Shakespeare play into dialogue with other versions of the story, other accounts of a problem, we rarely resolve anything but rather complicate understandings of a play's

operations—how it achieves its effects—and of the problems and issues with which it engages.

For example, Shakespeare constantly draws our attention to anxiety about men's dependence on women to perpetuate their names and transfer their property, anxiety about the prevalence of adultery and the conjectural nature of paternity. Shakespeare revisits this anxiety not only in cuckold jokes and nervous remarks about paternity but in four plots that constitute an extended inquiry into the individual, social, and formal resources needed to give the dilemma of misplaced jealousy a comic conclusion (Much Ado), a tragic one (Othello), or a fantastical one (Winter's Tale, Cymbeline). In each of these plays, the jealous husband falsely accuses his wife. But other playwrights consider the wife who is actually unfaithful and suggest that, even in that case, it is possible for the marriage and the story to find various resolutions. Shakespeare depends on temporary deaths to buy the time and create the remorse jealous husbands need to surrender their doubts and reclaim their wives (and that accused wives need to get over their anger, although Shakespeare is much less interested in that). Wives can be forgiven on the condition that they are innocent and that they have seemed to be dead for days or years. But Thomas Heywood, whose adulterous wives have usually done the deed, has them eliminate themselves, and the problems they pose, either through suicide (A Woman Killed with Kindness) or through the helpful expedient of dropping dead (The English Traveller) rather than simply appearing to have done so, as Hero, Imogen, and Hermione all do. In a wonderful play to which Bradin Cormack has drawn our attention, the Webster and Rowley collaboration A Cure for a Cuckold, the cuckolded husband, Compass, whose wife Urse has had a child by another man while Compass was away at sea (and presumed dead), "cures" his own cuckoldry first by delighting in his wife's baby and claiming it as his own and second by feigning death so that he and his wife can marry again. Shakespeare's husbands invent or fall for fictions of their wives' adultery. Compass cooks up a story that restores his marriage and expands his family and serves his own comic plot by playing the Shakespearean woman's part of pretending to be dead. In another twist on the story of marital infidelity, in The Tragedy of Mariam Elizabeth Cary imagines that there might be betrayals more troubling than adultery. One could go on and on. My point

is that one of the most valuable "contexts" for thinking about Shakespeare's choices and inclinations is the different ways other playwrights tackle similar conflicts and work through similar scenarios. If writers work with story kits containing familiar elements—here the triangle of jealous husband, suspected wife, and purported lover—what is the range of configurations and outcomes possible in early modern drama?

Attending to "social contexts" is usually assumed to require looking beyond the drama to illuminate the telling differences among writers, across time, and across genre, as well as the tantalizing overlaps between, for example, the blood-sport bearbaiting and the various suffering Shakespeare characters who describe their situation through reference to the procedures of the arena. As Gloucester says in *Lear*, "I am tied to the stake and I must stand the course" (3.7.53). Understanding this image begins with a gloss—to what kind of stake does Gloucester refer? What is the scenario he conjures up? But the more one tries to visualize and relate the suffering man's situation to that of the bear (on whose perseverance an early modern theatregoer might have placed a bet) the more one enters a knowledge-making process that, for contemporaries, required the ability to link the stage and the arena, human and animal suffering, and, for readers and viewers now, demands the imaginative leap of entering another time and place. A crucial part of this knowledge-making process, then and now, is the recognition of its limits: we can never fully know, for example, what animals—or other humans—feel. But we can begin to understand the available terms in which suffering could be described and the most well-worn paths of connection between one arena of exposure and trial and another.

What might be called social context, here the practice of bearbaiting, might work as a kind of frame or foil. Foil first referred to a thin sheet of metal placed under or behind a precious stone to enhance its luster. By extension, it came to mean, according to the *OED*, "Anything that serves by contrast of color or quality to adorn another thing or set it off to advantage." With this meaning, foil is used to describe how one character relates to another as a revealing contrast. But if we think of social context as a foil, then it threatens to elevate the Shakespearean text as a jewel, superior to its setting, and simultaneously to fix it in place, framing it but also shutting it in. This would foil the expansive possibilities of contexting.

For the jewel is not without flaw, nor is it set unshakably in its illuminating foil. As we all know, it is itself unstable, in process, and under negotiation. Shakespeare, famously, seems to have started with a crowded calendar and a crammed notebook rather than a clean slate, borrowing and upcycling. Some plays survive in multiple versions; these might include quarto and folio versions, which cannot be explained simply as earlier and later, bad and good versions. Recent work has drawn our attention to a play not as one text but as a congeries of mobile pieces, which might have included the scrolls actors used to learn their parts and their cues, the letters and proclamations read on stage, music, the actor's memory of other parts he had played or other actors who had played similar parts. Plays in performance challenged their audiences to engage in piecework and in guesswork, as William N. West has shown. Before they ever reached the printshop, then, playtexts were con-texts.

Reminding ourselves that Shakespeare's plays are as much works in progress as are "social contexts" can also remind us that a contextualizing practice might require us not just to venture out, but to dig in. What is the play's provenance and authority? A speech that seems familiar—Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy—looks different when we read it in the context of the play as a whole, attending to why it appears when and where it does. Every time I reread *Hamlet*, for instance, I find it jarring that he laments that no traveler returns from the "undiscovered country" (3.1.78) of death after he has encountered the Ghost, who so unsettlingly has. Even after we accept a given text as our object of analysis, need we necessarily look away from it to find social contexts? Might we think of the play itself as a kind of historical "evidence"? It is often a useful exercise to consider: If I had only a given play, what might I think I knew about early modern attitudes toward grief or marriage, sexuality or kingship, or anything? Now that it is so easy to find answers on the Internet, the questions we ask have become more pressing.

Furthermore, if we think of context as an open-ended and interactive process, what readers are doing or making rather than what they find, then contexting need not contain or delimit meaning, hedging Shakespeare round with a policeable perimeter of the historically accurate (as opposed to the anachronistic). We might trace paths of connection across texts and across time

and find new nodes of connection that light the play up in new ways or open it out. Passages about, and images of, bearbaiting may offer both the romantically dusty whiff of the archive and the bracing appeal of newly acquired information. But contemplating where we ourselves witness images of someone tied to the stake might provoke reflection on the many, many depictions of restraint and torture we see in contemporary media and the way that Shakespeare's use of this image invites us to imagine what it is like to be the one immobilized, the one tortured. Focusing on suffering bears can make it too easy to forget our own complicity in brutality, the ways in which we have not made as much progress as shock at bearbaiting or public execution might assure us we have.

If context is a process, then it is ongoing and might include afterlives, revivals and survivals, as well as the surprising tenacity not only of a Shakespeare play as a whole but of a character, a phrase, or a plot that floats free from it and latches on to new conditions. Divorced from the play, what meanings does a famous line or speech jettison and what new meanings does it seem to pick up? Many people who have not read *The Merchant of Venice* might have seen Jon Stewart, responding on the Daily Show to Joseph Biden's reference to "shylocks," screaming "Fuck you Shakespeare ... I've been waiting four hundred years to say that." Biden's grouping of unscrupulous moneylenders under Shylock's name, and Stewart's vehement response, suggest the far-reaching social implications of Shakespearean representations. A character's name can trail clouds of association, some of them obscure, even as it also accrues new resonances. Thinking about a play's afterlife can seem to position it as a kind of origin, the stone dropped in the water from which the ripples fan out. But the Shakespeare play is not as rock solid as that.

I would like to turn, finally, to two kinds of objects documenting early modern reading practices—marginalia (or the annotations in the margins of a printed text) and compilations (by which I mean a whole range of texts produced through breaking down and reassembling texts)—in order to figure two different processes by which one might "context" Shakespeare. What we once thought it meant to attend to social contexts might best be figured in the image of the printed text with marginalia. Such texts were central evidence in crucial case studies in the history of reading. The notes in the margins might gesture in different directions

and be written in different hands. But picturing the page or even interleavings—blank pages bound in to make space for a reader's notes—we might still think of one text as at the center and its contexts gathering around it. For Shakespeareans, that central text is usually Shakespeare, and everything else gains value through its association with him or supplements our understanding of Shakespeare's works. As has been much discussed, marginalia pose various evidentiary problems. Those annotated texts that survive tend to have been the work of elite male readers and notetakers, either because they were more likely to annotate their texts or because their notes were considered valuable and so preserved. Many libraries cropped or erased the very annotations scholars now treasure. Yet the model of reading they document or perform remains one that structures many new reading platforms. *Internet Shakespeare Editions*, for example, focuses on playtexts, but offers pathways outward to "supplementary and related materials," including what could be called "social contexts" (under the "Life & Times" tab). For many readers, academic and non, the center of attention remains the play, and we depend on editors to decide what goes in the margins.

The counterpoint to the printed book with its marginalia is the compilation, commonplace book, or scrapbook. Scholarship on reading practices suggests that many early modern readers broke texts down, collected fragments, and then combined texts they'd written and texts they'd collected into new texts. The compiler makes meaning by materially asserting the relations he or she sees or creates among texts, composing what we might now call collages, textual clusters, or word maps, using scissors, glue, and pins rather than data searches. Like the elite readers who entered their notes in the margins of printed texts, these compiling or relational readers posit relationships among texts, ideas, and experiences. Sometimes there was an interactive dimension to these transactions as well, as one reader added to or critiqued what another had written, using the process to forge relations among readers and their readings. The social aspect of some digital platforms is starting to open up a similar space for collaboration and interaction. Descriptions of the Folger Luminary Shakespeare, for example, promise to promote social reading, content creation, networking, and mobile learning. New technologies might, then, facilitate a venerable process. At present, such platforms downplay what conventional editions have

included as contexts, in part because crowds don't always know about or have access to the sources. But if contexts are as dynamic as the Shakespeare con-text itself, as I have been arguing here, then there might be more room for the collaborative compilation of contexts.

Whereas I have taken the printed text with its marginalia as one model for a contextualizing practice, focused on one central text and, often, the commentary of one self-documenting reader, I propose the compilation as a model for an altogether messier process, which decenters (even breaks up) the texts it engages, emphasizes the compiler's agency in forging connections, and relates the contexter to the crowd of others. Shifting attention to our own practices erodes the distinction between text and context by reminding us that we are not talking about stable objects of study so much as about the dynamic interpretive processes through which we engage and constitute them. The Shakespeare text may be adept at generating attachments but it doesn't do it alone. In our creative and critical practice we assemble and relate ideas, texts, moments, images, people, and objects. In owning up to our own agency, we can also refuse the false distinction between historicism as the recognition of difference, rupture, and change and presentism as the insistence on relatedness. We might also consider surrendering the pleasure of scolding others for failing to master their contexts in favor of the abashed recognition of the limits of our own knowledge. Pieces are missing. The glue connecting one piece to another keeps coming unstuck. We misunderstand some of what we feel most sure about. Join the crowd.

"*Hic et ubique*": *Hamlet* in sync

Bradin Cormack

Set off as it is here, the *social* in *social context* can be seen to name both a particular kind of context among others and, paradigmatically, almost tautologically, a quality pertaining to context generally, as alliance or fellowship or, most basically, relation. Like background, a context is never given, but always made or in the making, just at the moment when its use brings it into relation with

the other text or texts it is to help stabilize. In the past thirty years, it has become a commonplace (no less correct for that) to note that contexts are as fluid and dynamic as the partners they serve. This openness pertains to context not only as a cultural phenomenon, whereby everything is seen to participate, always partially, in an only emergent, always elusive networked whole, but also as a logical consequence of the thing context is. *Text* and *context* name aspects of a practical, social operation whose discursive product *is* the relation we name in those two parties and by those two names. Even if it doesn't usually come out so, therefore, this means also that a play might as easily be a context for grasping the force of a legal report or husbandry manual or conduct book as the reverse. (Properly speaking, of course, this implies neither relativism nor subjectivism; nor, equally, must it disrupt the hierarchies that today, as we know, *literary* critics must import when they attend to their objects.) At another level, indeed, the playtext is always going to be contextual, since, in the ongoing shuttling of position inherent in the interpretive dynamic, it is the text that makes the context *as such* visible, the text that is the context for context, in the Derridean sense Claire Colebrook identifies when she writes that "any sense or understanding of context already differs from the 'context itself,'" the difference lying in the "repeatable and distinct shape" that makes the specific event, even in its specificity, "readable" and "repeatable" ("The Context of Humanism," 2011). This repeatability is a transcendence of which the historicist in particular is aware, inseparable as it is from the specificities against which a presentist reckoning is sometimes, and too blandly, measured.

Context specifies. "What means this, my lord?" (3.2.129), Ophelia asks of the dumb action onstage, thereby repeating the terms in which Horatio has earlier asked after the mere sound, offstage, of a trumpeted flourish: "What does this mean, my lord?" (1.4.7). The context Hamlet offers in explanation of the latter—the king is following a norm in social drinking—specifies with a (customary) here and now the meaning of a sound that would otherwise not have *no* meaning, but, rather, a more general one, which, steady, persists, however, into the other. The custom, Hamlet then avers in a further application of a now personal context for the extraction of the right significance from sound, is "to my mind ... / More honoured in the breach than the

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