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Elucidating the Truth in Criticism  
Stacie Friend

1. Introduction

Just over 75 years ago, John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941) lent its name to the influential formalist movement. In the next two decades, formalism would dominate both literary studies and the philosophy of art. Indeed one of the most important manifestoes of the New Criticism, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946)—along with its sister article, "The Affective Fallacy" (1949)—was co-authored by a literary theorist and critic, William K. Wimsatt, and a philosopher, Monroe Beardsley. Starting in the 1960s, however, arguments within literary studies and philosophy challenged this formalist consensus. Although close reading remains a standard teaching tool, few scholars would now accept the New Critical conception of the literary work as a self-contained, autonomous aesthetic object.

Despite this consensus, the shift away from the traditional formalist picture took different shapes in the two disciplines. In analytic aesthetics it was motivated primarily by arguments for the relevance of an artwork's *origins*. Consideration of "indiscernibles"—such as Danto's red canvases, perfect forgeries, and Borges's Pierre Menard—suggested that the identity and nature of an artwork depend fundamentally on the context of creation. Kendall Walton (1970) persuaded many that proper categorization, essential to appreciation, turns on historical intentions and practices. Today, debates over interpretation take for granted that facts about origins determine at least some critically relevant properties. Those who defend *historicism* claim that the history of the work, usually including the author's intentions, constrains its correct interpretation; developments after the work's production are irrelevant to meaning.<sup>1</sup> Those who defend what I shall call *non-historicism* do not deny a role for origins, but allow other factors at least an equal role.<sup>2</sup>

In literary studies, by contrast, the rejection of the New Criticism was associated with the critique of notions like objectivity, truth, and stable meaning, as well as the rise of theory, which challenged the autonomy of literature both from other disciplines and from social and political contexts. Academic criticism is marked by a proliferation of perspectives, including (non-exhaustively) psychoanalytic, Marxist, reader-response, New Historicist, postcolonial, feminist, and cognitive. Facts about authors and origins are rarely treated as a significant constraint.

Analytic aesthetics has had relatively little (or positive) to say about these schools of criticism. To historicist philosophers they may appear anachronistic, imposing theories and concerns that could not have played any role in the creation of the work and therefore cannot be relevant to discovering a work's meaning. Exemplifying this approach, Robert Stecker (2003) claims that academic critics are engaged in a different (though perfectly legitimate) enterprise, such as proposing ways "of understanding a work against the background of a set of large, culturally significant ideas, myths, or theories" (54) or displaying a work's relevance to a particular group (77). Notably, these critical aims cannot yield incompatible interpretations; many ways of understanding a work are possible, and significance is relative to an audience. Non-historicists can accommodate incompatible interpretations, but they do not typically assess the merits of particular critical approaches. Regardless of the background theory, interpretations are evaluated according to formalist criteria such as comprehensiveness, textual evidence, and the extent to which they generate a "satisfying or rewarding" reading of a work (Lamarque 2008, 162) or "maximize its interest and value" (Davies 2006, 237).<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as these strategies treat the interpretations of different critical schools as on a par, they are inadequate. For the theories that ground these interpretations differ in the claims they make about the world. Some of these claims are *true* (or at least epistemically meritorious), and some of them are *false* (or at least epistemically defective). I contend that a non-historicist interpretation that relies on the former is better than one that relies on the latter. Now, this contention is widely accepted in other domains. To understand why someone hears voices we do not cite demon possession; to explain why lightning strikes we do not invoke Zeus's wrath. Yet when it comes to literary interpretation the relevance of ordinary truth about the world is controversial. Critics in the Freudian and Marxist traditions, for example, appear unperturbed by objections to the underlying theories, perhaps because they do not take themselves to aim at truth. But this attitude is misguided. Truths about the world play a fundamental role in interpretation.

In particular, truth is essential to what Beardsley called *elucidation*: going beyond the explicit text to fill in the "world" of the work (Beardsley 1981, 144). An appropriate way to fill in these details is by relying on what is actually true. This poses a challenge to both historicist and non-historicist strategies for assessing different critical perspectives. I will argue that for any literary work, there can be two equally correct but incompatible elucidations, one historicist and the other non-historicist. My claim is that the correctness of the non-historicist elucidation is not (fully) explained by formalist criteria; epistemic considerations play an essential role. I conclude by considering the implications for evaluating different critical perspectives.

## 2. Elucidation in Criticism

Elucidation is but one element of interpretation, itself only one dimension of criticism. For instance, many critics offer evaluations of a work or its features, and others consider what a work tells us about its author or context, humanity, or the world in general.<sup>4</sup> Interpretation is usually necessary for such critical activities. In addition to elucidation, Beardsley specified two interpretive tasks: ascertaining the meanings and connotations of words, phrases, or passages, which he called *explication*; and identifying the themes and theses in the work as a whole, which I call *thematic interpretation*.<sup>5</sup>

Although I say little about explication or thematic interpretation, a few comments are in order. Explication is the element of interpretation for which talk of *meaning* makes the most sense, as it aims to gloss particular words, phrases, sentences, and passages in context. I assume a minimal historicism about explication. Anyone who accepts the distinction between a mere text—a string of words and sentences as abstract symbols—and a literary work, a text produced by an author (or authors) at a particular time and place, also accepts that the linguistic conventions pertinent to explication must be contemporary with the writing.<sup>6</sup> Debates over explication in analytic aesthetics usually focus on the role of the author's intentions. For instance, intentionalists often argue that a work's meaning is determined by (successfully realized) intentions, whereas anti-intentionalists reject this characterization.<sup>7</sup> Thematic interpretation is less often the focus of such debates, and it concerns "meaning" only in a much broader sense (Lamarque 2008, 148–68). However, it cannot easily be extricated from views about explication and elucidation.

To elucidate a work is to determine what is going on in the storyworld, what is "true in the story"—or as I prefer, *storified*—where this is not specified by the explicit text and may even contradict it (as with unreliable narrators).<sup>8</sup> Philosophical discussions of this topic, under the rubric of "truth in fiction," focus on straightforward cases. Thus David Lewis (1983) remarks

that in the Conan Doyle stories, Sherlock Holmes lacks a third nostril and has never visited Saturn's moons. We might also mention that in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, the narrator Darling breathes oxygen and is subject to gravity. That no one would doubt these story-truths is precisely the point; the question is how to explain our confidence in conclusions that go beyond the explicit. Elucidation is more interesting when it seeks the unobvious story-truths, the ones that generate disagreement.<sup>9</sup> Beardsley provides the following examples: "Is Hamlet mad? What is Raskolnikov's real motive in killing the old woman? Where is the speaker and what is his situation in 'Gerontion' and 'Sailing to Byzantium'? What traits are basic to the character of Antigone?" (1981, 242). Many puzzling works demand efforts at elucidation. Anyone who fails to wonder who Godot is and why Vladimir and Estragon await him, or who is unperturbed by Bartleby's intransigence, has simply not engaged with the relevant works.<sup>10</sup>

Answering such questions is, as Peter Lamarque observes, "more like the interpretation of action than of sentences" (2008, 146). Elucidation cannot straightforwardly be assimilated to the meanings of sentences in context, or even of utterances (*utterance meaning*). One dimension of utterance meaning is the meaning of the words in context; another is what the speaker intends to communicate by uttering the words. Elucidation, on the other hand, concerns not what authors *write*, but what they *omit*. As a consequence, intentions are often less important than expectations. Authors will certainly intend readers to make certain assumptions and inferences.<sup>11</sup> But because authors expect readers to fill in the background, they need neither explicitly detail, nor have specific intentions about, every aspect of the storyworld. An author can set her story in London, taking for granted that readers will fill in the setting with their information the city, without intending to communicate anything in particular about it. Nonetheless elucidation is plausibly concerned with meaning in the sense of *content*—what a work is about, what it represents—rather than just the significance of that content.<sup>12</sup>

In practice, critics aim to elucidate particular features of a work, those that are interesting and puzzling; they do not, *per impossibile*, try to describe every aspect of the storyworld. I will follow this practice and pose a basic question: What psychological theory is relevant to explaining Hamlet's behavior? (I do not assume there is only one.)<sup>13</sup> The position I defend is nicely articulated by Berys Gaut:<sup>14</sup>

Should one use Elizabethan humor-psychology (Hamlet is clearly of the melancholic humor), Freudian theory, modern clinical psychology, or some other theory? ... [T]he best response is to relativize: we can give interpretations relative to whatever psychological theory was intended to apply to the character (presumably humor-psychology in the case under consideration) and also provide interpretations relative to whatever theory would best explain the character's behavior, were he real. (This need not be a completely correct theory, since even false theories can yield insights into particular cases—Freudian and Marxist theories are, perhaps, of this sort.) (Gaut 1993, 603–604)

I agree with Gaut that these two interpretations of the written play—the one according to which Hamlet is characterized by the melancholic humor, and the one that takes him to have whatever psychology people actually do—are correct, though they are incompatible. I will, though, cast doubt on the extent to which false theories can yield insights.<sup>15</sup>

One might object that the whole question is misguided. After all, fictional characters are not human beings; they do not actually have psychologies.<sup>16</sup> However, elucidation does not concern fictional characters' properties (if any) *in reality*, but rather their properties *in the*

*storyworld*. This is a matter of how we are supposed to imagine, and we are certainly supposed to imagine Hamlet to be a human being. We care about many works of literature because we are engaged with the characters, not merely as fictional devices—from an “external” perspective—but also as imagined persons—from an “internal” perspective (Lamarque and Olsen 1994, 143–48). Both perspectives are relevant to explaining why characters are represented as behaving as they do, but the urge to elucidate is usually motivated by the internal perspective. That said, elucidation leaves a great deal indeterminate. Just as Lady Macbeth had no definite number of children, there is no single answer to the question of Godot’s identity. Nonetheless, elucidation is often central to efforts at interpretation. I will assume its cogency in what follows.

### 3. A Historicist Elucidation

Now, the question about Hamlet’s underlying psychology is typically asked not for its own sake, but in the service of addressing other critical concerns. Madness is more than a psychological condition in *Hamlet*; it is a theme of the play. Much critical ink has been spilt on the question of why Hamlet hesitates in exacting vengeance, and his mental and emotional states are relevant to the answer. Still, deciding on an appropriate psychological theory does not by itself answer interesting interpretive questions, nor does it supply a clinical “diagnosis.” Rather, it provides a framework within which to explore Hamlet’s actions. With these qualifications in mind, in this section I defend the historicist elucidation in terms of humoral psychology.

The default assumption today is that Hamlet’s underlying psychology is just ordinary human psychology. This is why the character strikes us as realistic, why people from different cultures and times can relate to him, and so on. Given the strength of this intuition, one might wonder whether a historicist interpretation could accommodate it. Shakespeare presumably intended that Hamlet be subject to explanation by whatever account best explains human beings. This is no doubt true; but Shakespeare and his audience would have assumed that the account was humoral psychology.

Allusions to the four humors are found throughout Shakespeare’s plays, including in *Hamlet* itself (Reid 1996). For example, Hamlet remarks that “blessed are those/Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled” (Shakespeare 2003, 3.3.72–74), referring to sanguinity; and swears to Laertes, “I am not splenitive [and] rash,” referring to choler (5.1.275). Melancholy is named twice in the play, by Hamlet in soliloquy (2.2.630) and by Claudius in describing Hamlet’s mood (3.1.79). Hamlet’s symptoms—both those revealed in the soliloquies and those exaggerated in public—provide a textbook case of melancholy as defined by Elizabethan and Jacobean treatises, such as Timothy Bright’s 1586 *A Treatise of Melancholie* and Robert Burton’s 1621 *Anatomy of Melancholy*.<sup>17</sup> Hamlet cannot seem to escape his grief; he appears irresolute, fearful, jealous, and suspicious; he broods and thinks excessively. The other also characters assume that Hamlet is melancholic, proposing solutions familiar to Elizabethans (Harrison 1929).

Of course the reference to melancholy does not fully explain a complex character like Hamlet or his role in the play. Shakespeare has used a familiar vengeance plot, the basic story and characters lifted from previous playwrights; but he has placed the action in the hands of someone sensitive to the ethical dilemmas posed by vengeance (Shapiro 2006, 320). In the drama’s earlier incarnations, the protagonist was undeniably justified in taking revenge, and had merely to overcome practical obstacles until the opportunity arose. For Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the situation is far less clear-cut, so that he grapples with fundamental questions of right and wrong. Yet the assumption that Hamlet is melancholic plays a role. For Shakespeare and his

contemporaries, a melancholic condition would constitute the natural background for Hamlet's internal struggles. Attributing such reflections to characters of other temperaments, such as the choleric Laertes, would be implausible. So although we have no statements of intention by Shakespeare, it is safe to assume that he took humoral psychology for granted and expected Hamlet to be seen as melancholic.

One of the central aims of interpretation is surely to understand why a work is the way it is. We want to know both what the words on the page mean and why they are there. These two questions cannot easily be separated. For example, if we elucidate *Hamlet* against a background of humoral psychology, we will treat the frequent mentions of *earth* as symbolic of his affliction. The historicist approach thus indicates a concern with the external perspective, with how the work has been constructed. The most plausible versions of historicism do not limit this concern to questions of intention; they also invoke conventions, traditions, historical conditions, and the author's other psychological states (e.g., Wollheim 1980, 201; Stecker 2012, 56). These, I have argued, include expectations. Shakespeare sprinkles references to the humors in his plays, but he does not offer diagnoses of characters. Instead, he expects his audience to fill in the gaps with their shared assumptions about the humors.

A thorough understanding of any literary work requires grasping why the work is constructed as it is. Elucidating *Hamlet* in terms of humoral psychology is clearly justified by this aim, and anyone who failed to recognize the role of the humors in the play's construction would have missed a key feature of the work. This does not mean, however, that the only correct interpretation of *Hamlet* is one that presupposes Elizabethan theories of psychology. I turn now to an equally justified non-historicist elucidation that does not.

#### 4. A Non-historicist Elucidation

Above I said that our default assumption is that whatever best explains ordinary human psychology also explains Hamlet's actions. The universality of the play's appeal turns to a large extent on this assumption, which renders Hamlet a human being "like us." Can this default assumption be justified? Or is it akin to assuming that the words 'dearest' and 'adulterate' in Shakespeare means the same as the modern words—a mistake that must be corrected if we are to properly appreciate the play? I will argue that the assumption is indeed justified, though not for the standard non-historicist reason.

On the face of it, non-historicists seem to have a straightforward justification of the default assumption: Treating Hamlet as a human being, to be understood as we understand each other, makes the play more rewarding. For many readers, construing Hamlet's actions as produced by an imbalance of humors would probably render him alien. The point is even clearer for Ophelia. Whereas male melancholy was associated with intellect and even genius, Elizabethans would have elucidated Ophelia's behavior in terms of "erotomania," a female melancholy resulting in madness: "Biological and emotional in origins, it was caused by her unrequited love and repressed sexual disorder" (Showalter 2016). I resist interpreting any female character in such terms; if this is how we should construe Ophelia, she loses interest. Ophelia is a far more appealing if we update her psychology.

Nonetheless, the standard non-historicist justification of the default assumption is inadequate. The elucidation of the play liable to afford the most pleasure is not necessarily one that accords with the truth about human psychology, or even the best theory available. First, readers may find rewarding an elucidation that accords with *their beliefs* about human psychology, even if their beliefs are inconsistent with what is known. Second, readers may find

pleasurable an elucidation that relies on a theory they think is false. One could enjoy the Freudian reading of *Hamlet* without believing in the Oedipus complex.

The inadequacy of the standard non-historicist approach is best demonstrated by example. Nineteenth-century critics traced Ophelia's madness to her adolescence, construed as "a period of sexual instability" that was "risky for women's mental health" (Showalter 1994, 229–30). Assume that the Victorians found this the most rewarding conception of Ophelia. It seems as if the non-historicist ought to treat their elucidation as no worse (or better) than our own. After all, there is some sense in which *Hamlet* can be read in accordance with Victorian assumptions, just as it can be read in accordance with humoral psychology or recent theories.<sup>18</sup> The non-historicist might count the multiplicity of readings as evidence of the play's richness. However, this is not quite right; the Victorian reading can *no longer* be as rewarding. Insofar as we reject nineteenth-century psychological presuppositions, treating Ophelia's madness as the result of feminine adolescent sexual instability is just as off-putting as tracing it to erotomania. Yet if all that can be said in favor of understanding Ophelia in our own terms is just that they are *ours*, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that every elucidation is on a par.

The conclusion that every elucidation is equally justified *contradicts* rather than supports the default assumption that Hamlet's psychology is ordinary human psychology. Only the most skeptical would deny that there are better and worse accounts of human psychology. So if the default assumption is correct, there must be better and worse ways of elucidating Hamlet's actions; they are *not* all on a par. How, then, might we justify the default assumption?

The answer lies in recognizing that the default assumption is just an instance of a broader presupposition: that the storyworld is like the real world in at least certain respects. Consider again the uncontroversial cases of "truth in fiction." How do we know that Darling breathes oxygen and is subject to gravity? We simply take for granted that ordinary facts about physics, chemistry, and physiology carry over to the world of *We Need New Names*. We do so because we adhere to what Marie-Laure Ryan (1980) calls the *principle of minimal departure*: the presumption that the storyworld remains as close as possible to the real world. If we did not adhere to this principle, we would have no reason to prefer an oxygen-breathing Darling to one who happens to breathe methane.

The principle of minimal departure articulates the basic intuition; it does not tell us how to determine what is storified. The usual way to implement the intuition is with some version of the *Reality Principle*, a rule for making inferences from the *primary* story-truths—those somehow established by the explicit text—to the *implied* story-truths.<sup>19</sup> Roughly, the Reality Principle instructs us to ask what the real world would be like if the primary story-truths were actually true; the implied story-truths are those that would also obtain in that counterfactual circumstance. From what is explicit we infer that Darling is human, and if it were true that Darling was human, she would breathe oxygen.

I have argued elsewhere for a different implementation of the principle of minimal departure, which I call the *Reality Assumption*: the assumption that everything that is (really) true is storified, unless excluded by the work (Friend forthcoming). Unlike the Reality Principle, the Reality Assumption (henceforth: RA) is not a rule for inferring implied story-truths; instead, it is a starting point for specifying the input into such inferences. According to the RA, facts about the real world are storified by default, not as a consequence of determining what else would be true if the primary story-truths obtained. From the beginning we take for granted that everything that obtains in reality is storified. This presumption, though, is both defeasible and easily defeated; reliable story-truths that contradict the facts, genre conventions, and a host of

interpretive considerations will lead us to exclude some of what we know about the world from being storified. Importantly, though, even when we reject many features of the real world these rejections are *localized*. That we exclude facts about physics or physiology need have no implications for other aspects of the storyworld, including psychological explanation. We take for granted that familiar behavior can be explained in familiar ways, and we do not give up that assumption unless we must.

If we accept the RA as a starting point for interpretation, we have a default justification for taking Hamlet's psychology to be the same as any other human being's. This is not to deny that other ways of implementing the principle of minimal departure, such as the Reality Principle, would yield the same conclusion. For ease of exposition I will frame the discussion in terms of my preferred view, but references to the RA can be replaced with any similar principle in what follows. What matters is that the non-historicist relies on some mechanism of generating story-truths that takes real-world facts as background, even if these facts were inaccessible to the author or her contemporaries. The question, then, is whether we are justified in adopting the RA, and with it the default assumption about Hamlet's psychology. I address this question in the next section.

## 5. Real-World Background

There is ample empirical evidence that readers do in fact rely on a real-world background in understanding stories. They take for granted that ordinary truths obtain in the storyworld even when they are irrelevant (Weisberg and Goodstein 2009). They automatically infer characters' emotional states based on background knowledge (Gernsbacher, Goldsmith, and Robertson 1992). And they have difficulty making inferences from explicit texts that rely on unrealistic suppositions (Graesser et al. 1998).<sup>20</sup> So as a descriptive claim about how we approach fiction, the RA is well-grounded. I defend a stronger claim: that the RA is necessary for narrative comprehension.

The standard way to make this point is by producing a passage about a sporting event that is incomprehensible to anyone who is unfamiliar with the sport. A sentence about cricket will do: "After 69 overs of their second innings, they had amassed only 104 for 5 on a pitch that was growing steadily easier" (Berkmann 1996, 60). Without the relevant knowledge, it is impossible to understand what is going on. The point is clearer when we consider more basic information about the world. Here is a passage produced by a computer in an early effort to create artificially intelligent storytellers:

One day Joe Bear was hungry. He asked his friend Irving Bird where some honey was. Irving told him there was a beehive in the oak tree. Joe threatened to hit Irving if he didn't tell him where some honey was. (Schank 1984, 83)

After being programmed with information about the link between beehives and honey, the computer produced the same story with a different ending: "Joe walked to the oak tree. He ate the beehive." Any competent reader would automatically grasp the appropriate relationship between beehives and honey. Without making such connections based on prior knowledge, we could neither understand nor produce coherent stories.

The example is mundane, but it demonstrates our constant, implicit reliance on background knowledge in reading. An author who dramatically departs from reality must still expect readers to make certain inferences based on what they already know; it would be



impossible to detail every aspect of the storyworld. So we have strong reasons to treat the RA as basic to story comprehension.

Despite these considerations there are numerous objections to the RA, familiar from discussions of the Reality Principle, which may be used to motivate the rejection of a broad real-world background for story-truth. I have addressed these in detail in Friend (forthcoming), so here I briefly consider only the most significant criticism: that the RA generates a glut of irrelevant story-truths, unknown to both authors and readers. To reply to this objection, I must say something more about my conception of story-truth.

On the account I prefer, what is storified is what readers are invited to imagine (Friend forthcoming). A work *invites* imagining P on the following condition: if the question arose and we had to choose between imagining that P and imagining that not-P, we would be required to imagine the former.<sup>21</sup> (If we are not required to imagine either, the story-truth of P remains indeterminate.) Invited imaginings are distinguished both from those that are *mandated*—where failure to imagine that P would mean failure to grasp the most basic elements of the story—and those that are *prescribed*—where we should imagine that P to have a full appreciation of the story. One can have a thorough understanding of *We Need New Names* without ever considering Darling’s respiration. Nonetheless, if the question came up, it would be absurd to deny that she breathes oxygen.

As this example suggests, I do not take story-truth to be constrained by relevance. Nor am I alone in this. When Lewis pointed out that Holmes has no third nostril and has not visited the moons of Saturn, he was not claiming that these story-truths were relevant to appreciating the Conan Doyle tales. Similarly, the participants in the Weisberg and Goodstein experiment mentioned above systematically agreed that true statements that “were not mentioned in any of the stories and had no bearing on any of the events or characters in the stories” obtained in the storyworld (2009, 72). For instance, participants agreed that mathematical truths were storified even in unrealistic fictions that had nothing to do with mathematics. Because an invitation to imagine is not an obligation, we can simply ignore such story-truths in the ordinary course of appreciation.

Many philosophers prefer to restrict the notion of story-truth to exclude such irrelevancies. Historicists do this by limiting attention to what the author (could have) intended or expected. Non-historicists might adopt a related strategy, limiting what is storified to the content that an informed reader would infer that a fictional or ideal version of the author, constructed in interpretation, believed or intended to be imagined.<sup>22</sup> From a non-historicist perspective, however, such restrictions are a mistake. First, it is impossible in the abstract to determine which truths might contribute to illuminating a work. Before the publication of Jean Rhys’s *The Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966, few would have seen facts about the history of Jamaica as germane to the interpretation of *Jane Eyre*. Yet postcolonial critics standardly invoke details of Jamaica’s colonial past in highlighting the fate of Rochester’s Creole first wife, Bertha Antoinetta Mason.<sup>23</sup> These postcolonial interpretations contravene any plausible reconstruction of Charlotte Brontë’s intentions, beliefs, or expectations. Nonetheless, they provide fascinating insight into a largely ignored figure.

Moreover, we can introduce a criterion of relevance for story-truths without rejecting the RA. For example, we can restrict the circumstances in which we allow a question about story-truth to come up to those in which we are trying to understand some element of the story, excluding idle speculation or philosophical thought experiments. We can also place constraints on when we would be required to choose between imagining that P and imagining that not-P, to

cases where there were implications for other interpretive issues. How best to apply these tests can only be decided on a case-by-case basis. Still, with respect to *Hamlet*, facts about human psychology—if not, say, quantum physics or geology—plausibly pass both. Questions about psychological explanation arise naturally in the course of trying to understand characters' actions, and the answers have important consequences, such as for how realistic those characters are.

In my view, the reason we assume a real-world background in interpretation is that we take literary works to be about the real world—*our* world—although they invite us to imagine this world to be different from how it actually is. The vast majority of stories, fiction or otherwise, concern the actions of persons (whether human or anthropomorphized). That we feel we can understand them as we understand each other goes a long way to explaining why we engage with them at all. If works of fiction were entirely cut off from our assumptions about reality, if we could find no connection to anything we recognize in the characters or events, we would not only fail to understand what we read; we would not care. It is a familiar observation that the great works like *Hamlet*, the ones that stand the test of time, are universal. They could not appeal across ages and cultures if they did not presuppose a shared background.

The point is not that works of fiction are more satisfying or rewarding because they concern the world we inhabit. This may contribute to our pleasure in reading; but by the same token it may reduce that pleasure, as when a work manifests racist, sexist, or other attitudes we reject. Whereas the original readers of *Jane Eyre* would have found the portrayal of Bertha Mason unobjectionable, modern readers are likely to be discomfited by implications that her racially impure blood accounts for her sensuality and savagery, and skeptical of Rochester's assertions that he was an innocent victim of seduction. The work would seem better if we set aside what we know about colonialism altogether, but then we would have to deny its relevance to these aspects of our world. So although elucidations that rely on the RA do not necessarily render individual works more rewarding, they do reflect an important dimension of the value of literature generally.

## 6. Defending Pluralism

So far I have argued for a historicist elucidation of *Hamlet* according to which Hamlet's behavior is to be explained in terms of humoral psychology, and a non-historicist elucidation according to which it is to be explained by whatever psychological account best explains human beings. In my view, neither has a better claim to be *the* correct interpretation. They are justified in different ways, but each captures something central to understanding the play: its historical context and the universal appeal of its characters. Many historicists, though, would deny that these are two equally justified interpretations. For them, elucidations that rely on the RA simply turn on readers' conceptions of reality, thereby revealing what the work *could* mean (to them), rather than what it *does* mean.<sup>24</sup> According to this view, elucidation can reveal the genuine meaning or content of a work only when we fill in the gaps with information available in the originating context.

Why do historicists assume that meaning is restricted to what could have played a role in the work's provenance? One reason is the association between work meaning and utterance meaning, but as noted above this analogy fits uneasily with elucidation. A more important reason is a conviction that the content of a work cannot change over time, even if its significance can. On this view meaning is *discovered*, not constructed.<sup>25</sup> However, the RA does not entail that the content of the work alters with later events. Elizabethans may have thought that humoral

psychology explained their own behavior as well as Hamlet's, but they were wrong. As we find out more about psychology, neuroscience, and so on, we find out more about the Elizabethans as well as ourselves. Of course our best current ways of elucidating Hamlet's psychology may also turn out to be mistaken; but the RA concerns what is actually the case, not our changing beliefs about it. Deploying better theories of the world to understand fictional characters and events is a matter of discovery, not construction.<sup>26</sup>

This conclusion is technically compatible with historicism. Historicists argue that developments after the production of a work are irrelevant to meaning. Taking into account what was already true of human psychology—even if unknown at the time the work was written—does not violate this restriction.<sup>27</sup> However, it does contravene a central motivation for historicism, namely our interest in explaining the construction of the work. For this purpose invoking humoral psychology to understand the characters of *Hamlet* is far more explanatory. It would be surprising for a historicist to claim that we should set aside humoral psychology in favor a theory that could play no role in the play's creation. I have called the latter approach non-historicist. Were the historicist to accept these two incompatible interpretations as equally correct, there would be nothing more than a terminological dispute between us.

Let us grant, then, that both elucidations of Hamlet's psychology aim to capture the meaning or content of the play. Both are concerned with the representational content of *Hamlet*, and both are consistent with the view that the meaning of a work does not change over time. A different objection is that the non-historicist elucidation will inevitably be less comprehensive and satisfying than the historicist elucidation.

With respect to comprehensiveness, the question is how a non-historicist interpretation of the psychology can accommodate the allusions to the four humors within the work. If the words in the play have their historically contextualized meaning, then 'melancholy' designates an excess of black bile and its associated temperament. A critic who rejects the humoral elucidation must offer some alternative account of these features of the play, or else concede that the historicist interpretation is more complete. In the present case, the non-historicist has a straightforward solution, since all the allusions are voiced by the characters. Because the characters are reasonably realistic representations of medieval Danes, it makes sense that they would believe in humoral psychology. It does not follow that humoral psychology is storified.<sup>28</sup> Compare the situation with historical fictions about the Middle Ages produced in our own context. Such fictions frequently attribute beliefs about the humors to their characters, but their authors do not expect readers to interpret the characters in those terms. Even by historicist lights, then, it is possible for characters to express opinions about psychology that are not storified. So the non-historicist elucidation need be no less comprehensive.

Still, the non-historicist approach might seem to yield a less satisfying interpretation. If we operate with the default assumption, we will understand Hamlet's actions in ways familiar to us; but there is no guarantee that we thereby deploy a true psychological account. According to the default assumption, Hamlet's psychology is not whatever we think it is, but rather whatever human psychology turns out to be. And there is every reason to assume that we are as ignorant of the truth in this domain as we are in many others. As a consequence, a non-historicist elucidation that relies on the RA seems less illuminating than a historicist elucidation that fills in the gaps with a robust psychological account.<sup>29</sup>

I disagree. If we find the default assumption plausible, we will not take a humoral elucidation to shed light on the characters' *psychology*, even if it does help us understand how the original audience would have interpreted it. The non-historicist approach I have defended

invites us to imagine the characters in the play as real human beings, to be understood in the ways we understand each other. An elucidation that draws on the best psychological theories available will therefore be superior to one whose grounding is epistemically inferior. It is implicit in such an interpretation that as we learn more about ourselves, we learn more about the characters.

I conclude that the non-historicist elucidation has as much claim to correctness as the historicist elucidation. The elucidation according to which Hamlet has whatever psychology ordinary human beings have is justified by the RA. The elucidation according to humoral psychology is justified by a particular interpretive aim, to understand why Shakespeare constructed the play as he did. Insofar as each interpretation takes for granted mutually exclusive accounts of human psychology, they offer incompatible descriptions of Hamlet. At the same time, each illuminates dimensions of the play long recognized by critics: the way in which the play captures Shakespeare's world on the one hand, and its universal appeal on the other. If we are pluralists about interpretation, we should accept both.

## 7. Alternative Elucidations

Do other elucidations have an equal claim to correctness? An obvious example to consider is the Freudian reading of *Hamlet*. According to Freud and his disciple Ernest Jones, Hamlet's behavior, most notably his delay in killing Claudius, is explained by repressed oedipal urges (Freud 2010; Jones 1976). Let us assume that Freud was wrong about the Oedipus complex; the relevant psychological account is false. We can further assume that the account is epistemically flawed, insofar as Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex is largely rejected even within psychoanalytic theory (Simon and Blass 1991). A non-historicist interpretation along Freudian lines therefore cannot be justified by appeal to the RA. (Nor, incidentally, can a historicist argue that Shakespeare's unconscious awareness of the complex played a role in the construction of *Hamlet*.) So if the Freudian elucidation—and by analogy, any other non-historicist elucidation founded on a false theory—has merit, it must be supported in some other way.

We might start with the familiar view that good interpretations maximize the value of a work. This does not mean merely that they increase our pleasure in reading. Rather, the claim is that other things being equal, interpretations “that make the work out to be artistically more meritorious as literature are to be preferred” (Davies 2006, 242). Reading a work *as literature*, on this view, is value-oriented. Interpretations provide reasons to engage with works, illuminating what is worthwhile in them. If the Freudian elucidation is justified in these terms, it must offer insight into the artistic merit of *Hamlet*.

This looks like a challenge. If belief in the Oedipus complex played no role in the construction of the play, then invoking it is unlikely to shed light on features of the work associated with artistry. For instance, a critic might explore the symbolic significance of references to *earth* in terms of humoral psychology, but will find no similar allusions to the Oedipus complex. This is not to say that a feature contributes to artistic merit only when it was intended to do so. The non-historicist elucidation I have defended highlights Shakespeare's capacity for insights that go beyond the confines of contemporary assumptions. This point relates to another kind of artistic value with which literature is frequently credited, namely cognitive value (see Gaut 2003). However, the known falsity of the Freudian account would presumably diminish rather than enhance the prospects for, say, conveying psychological insight or appropriately directing empathy.<sup>30</sup>

A more promising reason to adopt the Freudian approach is that it makes *salient* certain features of the work.<sup>31</sup> The conceit of the Oedipus complex offers a lens through which to view the play, highlighting certain aspects of the drama that might otherwise be less significant. It can be valuable to direct one's attention in new ways. However, we must be careful in delineating the relevant sort of value. First, taking a closer look at less obvious dimensions of work will not necessarily make it better; the postcolonial focus on Bertha Mason exemplifies the opposite effect. So increasing salience only enhances value if the highlighted features are themselves meritorious. Second, we can only notice what is there. We might value the Freudian elucidation for drawing attention to Hamlet's repulsion at Gertrude's sexual relationship with Claudius. But we have no reason independent of Freudian theory to think that Hamlet has repressed sexual feelings toward his mother. The Freudian interpretation prompts us to "notice" this oedipal tension in the same sense that shining a purple light on a white canvas prompts us to "notice" its violet hue. The interpretation does not so much highlight as *create* or *impose* the oedipal dynamic.

As remarked in §6, the idea that the meaning of a work is constructed rather than discovered is controversial. I will sidestep this debate. What matters here is that constructivist interpretations are justified instrumentally. For instance, constructivism in legal interpretation can be justified by the need to apply law to new cases (see Dworkin 1998). The parallel for art would be interpretations that enhance the significance of a work to new audiences. Setting aside worries about whether this method can identify "meaning," we may ask whether the Freudian elucidation renders *Hamlet* more significant. For anyone who recognizes the underlying theory to be false, the answer is surely no, for the same reason as interpreting Hamlet via humoral psychology limits its relevance.

Elucidations justified by the RA, by contrast, ensure significance. If we take Hamlet to have the same psychology as we do, better understanding Hamlet is better understanding ourselves. This kind of cognitive value, which reflects Shakespeare's talent in developing realistically complex characters, certainly indicates artistic merit. However, significance need not be associated with merit. When postcolonial critics explore Bertha Mason's background, they make *Jane Eyre* more relevant to our global, multicultural world; but they do so by highlighting the novel's flawed presuppositions. In other cases the increase of significance yields a mixed verdict. Early critics of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* treated it as a light Western comedy, controversial only for the potential appeal of Huck's delinquency to children. These readers saw nothing objectionable in the farcical "rescue" of Jim that unfolds in the final twelve chapters. More recent critics, who take the moral development of Huck's attitude to Jim as central to the novel's value, find the ending and its implicit racial attitudes problematic if not inexcusable.<sup>32</sup> The Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet* makes no such connections to our concerns.

Am I taking the ambitions of the Freudian elucidation too seriously? Within literary studies, the idea that interpretations aim at truth or objectivity—or that "reality" can be taken for granted in interpretation—remains suspect. Perhaps academic critics aim only for *ludic meaning*, attributed "in virtue of interpretive play constrained by only the loosest requirements of plausibility, intelligibility, or interest" (Levinson 1995, 223). From this perspective, it is worthwhile to read a work in different ways simply because doing so is interesting or entertaining. Judging by the popularity of Laurence Olivier's production and film, many people (myself included) enjoy imagining the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude in Freudian terms. Reading for fun requires no justification; harmless enjoyment is its own reward.

I have no objection to this kind of enjoyment. However, it is a mistake to treat all academic criticism as if its only aim were pleasure. Whatever critics may *say* about truth or reality, the reason it ultimately makes sense to apply theories of the world to literature must be that literature is about the very same world. If we took the female characters of nineteenth-century novels to be nothing more than constructs, it would be pointless to consider them from a feminist perspective grounded in real gender relations. If critics did not assume facts about race relations in Jamaica after emancipation, the postcolonial reading of *Jane Eyre* could not get off the ground. And lest we forget, Freud and Jones did not attribute the Oedipus complex to Hamlet just for amusement. Rather, they assumed that Hamlet had the same psychology as the rest of us; they were just wrong about how to explain it. The various critical perspectives we find today in the academy are valuable, not (only) insofar as they make reading more pleasurable, but insofar as they reveal the myriad ways in which works of literature relate to the world. Recognizing this source of value allows us to judge different critical approaches with respect to the truth or epistemic merit of the underlying theories. We should not shy away from this kind of evaluation.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term appears to originate with Savile (1985), but related views are defended by Wollheim (1980), Livingston (1993), Carroll (2009), Levinson (2011), and Stecker (2012), among others.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Lamarque (2008; 2010) and Zangwill (2001) defend versions of formalism, and Davies (2006) advocates anti-intentionalism, but all acknowledge that some properties of a work are determined historically.



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- <sup>3</sup> See also Dworkin (1998) and Raz (2010).
- <sup>4</sup> Carroll (2009) takes evaluation to be a defining feature of criticism, excluding much produced by the academy. The present paper assumes a more accommodating definition, such as Grant's (2013).
- <sup>5</sup> Beardsley called this *interpretation*, but I use the latter term in the ordinary sense.
- <sup>6</sup> On the contrast between work and text see especially Currie (1991).
- <sup>7</sup> Stecker (2012) offers a detailed defense of this intentionalist view.
- <sup>8</sup> I introduce the term *storified* in Friend (forthcoming) to limit the implication that "fictional truth" is a kind of truth, and because I apply the concept to nonfiction.
- <sup>9</sup> The term *interpretation* is sometimes reserved for this kind of elucidation, contrasted with uncontroversial *description*. See e.g. Lamarque (2008, 152).
- <sup>10</sup> As these cases indicate, elucidation cannot always sharply be distinguished from other dimensions of interpretation or criticism.
- <sup>11</sup> They may also have intentions about the point of a passage that can affect readers' further inferences, so that elucidation cannot be sharply separated from explication.
- <sup>12</sup> Though meaning and significance cannot always be sharply distinguished.
- <sup>13</sup> "Psychological theory" should be taken as shorthand for whatever set of theories is explanatory (e.g., some combination of folk and scientific psychology).
- <sup>14</sup> The example is also mentioned by Davies (2007, 61), Raz (2010, 167), and Levinson (2011, 205).
- <sup>15</sup> There may be many other interpretations as well, including those relevant to performances. For example, the Freudian theory plays a causal role in Laurence Olivier's production of *Hamlet* that it does not play in the original work.
- <sup>16</sup> This point was made most famously by Knights (1946).
- <sup>17</sup> Shakespeare may have read the Bright (O'Sullivan 1926).
- <sup>18</sup> The idea that interpretation should identify the various ways a work "can be read" is defended by Davies (1995).
- <sup>19</sup> The terminology is Walton's (1990, 142), though he questions whether any story-truths are directly generated by the explicit text (170–74).
- <sup>20</sup> I discuss these and related empirical findings in Friend (forthcoming).
- <sup>21</sup> This is Walton's most careful formulation defining fictional truth, or *fictionality* (1990, 40), but he does not distinguish prescriptions, invitations, and mandates.
- <sup>22</sup> Accounts of this sort are offered by Currie (1990), Byrne (1993), and Phillips (1999).
- <sup>23</sup> The seminal postcolonial critique is Gayatri Spivak's (1985), but many more have followed.
- <sup>24</sup> On this distinction see especially Levinson (1999).
- <sup>25</sup> Stecker (1997) offers an influential argument for this position. Arguments to the contrary advanced by Silvers (1991) and Bacharach (2005), but nothing I say in the present paper turns on this issue.
- <sup>26</sup> Raz (2010), though defending constructivism, takes this sort of interpretation to involve discovery.
- <sup>27</sup> Levinson (2011, 205) suggests this possibility as consistent with historicism (which he calls "traditionalism").
- <sup>28</sup> This proposal is not the consequence of some general principle that whenever a story conflicts with the truth, we should attribute false beliefs to characters. See Davies (2007) for reasons to doubt the general principle.
- <sup>29</sup> Thanks to Robert Stecker for raising this objection.
- <sup>30</sup> I reject the view that literature can be a self-sufficient source of these cognitive values independently of empirical considerations. For an opposed position see Stock (2006).
- <sup>31</sup> Thanks to Wolfgang Huemer for raising this point in conversation.
- <sup>32</sup> See the essays in Graff and Phelan (2004) and Leonard, Tenney, and Davis (1992).
- <sup>33</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Huddleston for valuable discussion of an early draft, and to Robert Stecker and an anonymous referee for comments which improved the paper throughout. Thanks also to James Grant and Alex Grzankowski for feedback on earlier ideas, and to the audience at the XII Conference of the Italian Society for Analytic Aesthetics for helpful questions.