



PROJECT MUSE®

Reading like an Editor: A Farewell Note

Catherine Belling

Literature and Medicine, Volume 37, Number 2, Fall 2019, pp. 247-250 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2019.0011>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/745336>

Reading like an Editor: A Farewell Note

Catherine Belling

“Farewell” is the usual title for this genre, the final editorial from a departing editor, but I use it uncomfortably, wanting to say “Wait, I’m not going anywhere—and anyway I’ve already gone.” I stepped down as editor at the end of 2018, and I thank Anne Hudson Jones for serving as interim editor for 2019 and for steering the journal’s transition to some important changes, described in her own update in this issue. This also does not feel like a leave-taking, just returning to being a “normal” reader and, I hope, sometimes an author. I must admit, though, that it is with some relief that I step away from the work of reading like an editor. I found it difficult. I’ll try to explain.

Reading has often been our subject in this journal, and two articles in this issue continue that thread. Matthew Rubery’s study of the ghastly condition called alexia—loss of the ability to read—serves as reminder of how remarkable humans are in our capacity to make life-preserving meaning out of marks we have the cognitive magic to use as signs. Without words written and read, meaning recorded at one time and retrieved at another, what would we be? Rubery describes several alexic people assiduously pretending to read, because “reader” and “person” have become inextricable for them. This anxious pseudo-lexia reminded me of another performance of reading that echoes in this issue.

In his moving account of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Arthur Frank reveals a layering of the play’s potential effects on those who come to it vulnerable, needing vicarious compassion when sick at heart. Frank’s work made me think about my own recent experiences of reading needily, and I also remembered the deeply vulnerable Ophelia and her own act of reading at the center of the play. While Hamlet muses on whether to be or not to be, he is not alone on the stage. Polonius and Gertrude hide, spying, but Ophelia is there in the open, bait. She mustn’t look as if she’s lurking about, so her father tells her “Read

on this book.”¹ Reading, he thinks, will make her look lonely, and that will impel Hamlet to confide in her. We, thanks to the soliloquy, can read Hamlet’s mind, but Ophelia waits in silent suspense, staring into her book. We could forget she’s there. He wrestles with his “dread of something after death” (3.1.86). She reads, until he notices her and breaks her heart.

At least that’s all we can tell—but we might also imagine her finding in that unnamed book a story to sustain her through what is to come. I wondered where else reading appeared in the play, so I did a text search for “read.” I didn’t sort out the spaces precisely enough, which led to an ominous but fitting apopheny: the first several instances are all to the word *dread*. And then, increasingly, you have *ready*, leading to Hamlet’s final resigned step off the edge: “Readiness is all” (5.2.237). The lexicon seems to follow from apprehensive delay toward resolution to act, not impetuously, but in the acceptance that his story will not, in the end, be his to tell.

But between dread and readiness (along with many people reading letters that were not intended for them) are two performances of reading—Ophelia’s and also Hamlet’s own. More parental spying: “But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading,” says his mother (2.2.183–84). Polonius rudely interrupts—“What do you read, my lord?” Hamlet protects his mind by eliding the meaning in his reading (pretended or real): “Words, words, words” (2.2.208–10). Like Ophelia’s, his book remains as closed to us as it is to the paranoid parents. This deflection makes Hamlet outwardly invulnerable; his reading protects him until he’s ready to decide.

Reading as an editor, I felt more like anxious Ophelia than antic Hamlet. This may seem paradoxical. The reading to which an editor subjects a submitted manuscript may seem like the least vulnerable kind of reading. After all, the manuscript has been offered up for evaluation and, according to statistical probabilities, is more likely to be rejected than embraced.

But reading to evaluate the fitness of a text to be published, knowing the professional stakes for its author, gave me some sleepless nights. There is the pressure of a certain kind of power, requiring decisiveness even when you worry that you’re just pretending to know what you’re doing, just performing as the right kind of reader. Of course some reads are easy: the *prima facie* not right for the journal (often submitted by authors who have evidently never read an issue or even a table of contents), and the *prima facie* perfect, where the first sentence makes you forget you’re supposed to be assessing because

you're immediately just reading as a delighted reader, absorbed and learning. But far more common are the ones where you have to list the pros and cons, sometimes with peer reviews in both columns, and you want to wait and get more information, more opinions, a closer read—but delaying may in the long run be worse for the author than a decision you'll regret. You want to stare worriedly at the pages like Ophelia until someone else does something decisive, even if it's dreadful, yet you mustn't waste time waiting for certainty.

Here's a further faintly absurd comparison, but also a serious argument for *Hamlet* as recommended text for another kind of vulnerable reader: How secure are doctors when they read their patients, knowing how being wrong will matter so much, and also knowing how rare it is to be absolutely and correctly sure you are right? Does medical decision-making move from dread to readiness?

Perhaps reading like an editor gave me a tiny insight into the high-stakes clinical complexity, and into how tempting it might be to deny the stakes and the ambiguity, to say let's just get the decision over with, I'll trust I know enough, go with my gut, get careless because being careful is so stressful. And at the same time to say wait! I'm not ready! What if I'm wrong? And then having to act. As a study in decision-making based on the careful reading of an emphatically multivalent text, *Hamlet* may be reassuring, in a tragic kind of way.

Despite all this worry, I hope I have done the journal good. My time as editor has felt well worthwhile. It allowed me to get to know and work with a remarkable group of people. The members of the editorial board have all been supportive and hard-working and inspiring, and I consider them my friends. They have set the journal growing towards its future well-faring. I thank them. The guest editors of these issues have made tremendous contributions to the growth of our field, and the anonymous volunteer peer reviewers hold up the entire enterprise of academic publishing. No amount of thanks would be sufficient. Without them, none of this would happen.

Special thanks go to Anne Hudson Jones, Rita Charon, and Maura Spiegel for leading the search for our new editor. And Anna Fenton-Hathaway has been much more to *Literature and Medicine* than is encompassed by the nominal role of managing editor. Her intellectual and organizational contributions, along with her precise, insightful, and diplomatic copy-editing, have shaped the quality of the journal since 2013 and will, I believe, continue to do so. I look forward to reading whatever these pages continue to hold, and I trust the wisdom of our next editor, Michael Blackie, who will be decisive, despite not knowing for sure.

NOTES

1. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.1.49–50. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library. Accessed November 7, 2019. <https://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/html/Ham.html>.