Research Notes

The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets in the Age of AI

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Should those who teach Shakespeare fear the rise of artificial intelligence, of Language Learning Machines (or LLMs) such as ChatGPT? One article from *Inside Higher Ed* reports that, "Students are turning to YouTube, podcasts and ChatGPT-crafted summaries rather than actually reading…" (Alonso). "Many students no longer arrive at college … prepared to read books" (qtd. in Horowitch), according to professors interviewed for an *Atlantic* article. Thus, students in English classes might not even read No Fear Shakespeare anymore since ChatGPT can hyper-simplify the Bard into bite-sized reductions akin to tweets and TikTok. AI, it seems, is eroding Shakespeare's shorelines.

Is the poetry critic equally in danger? I write this essay to seize this *kairos* in which two crucial moments overlap: first, the passing of the poetry critic Helen Vendler earlier this year (that is, 2024); and, second, the emergence of LLMs. For the editor Joshua Rothman, "we should presume that, whenever an A.I. replaces a person in some role or other, something … is lost." To replace a human critic like Vendler with AI is to lose two somethings: *fallibility* and *embodiment*.

Since my goal is to find "what makes the *human critic* unique in the age of AI" (to modify the title of Rothman's op-ed), I asked ChatGPT to produce a "critical reading of Sonnet 30," or *"When to the sessions of sweet silent thought*." The LLM responded by enumerating its "themes," breaking down the rhyme scheme, quatrains, and the couplet of the poem, and mentioning "financial metaphors" in words such as "account" and "expense." Its reading concludes that, "Shakespeare's exploration of grief and consolation [offers] a timeless

reflection on how personal connections can heal even the deepest wounds."

That this reading is fallible seems easy enough to prove. At the bottom of the message bar is the caveat, "ChatGPT can make mistakes." When I asked the AI if it has "any way to know if your critical reading is correct," it answered, "No" because its response is only based on pattern recognition. As the computer science professor Melanie Mitchell points out, LLMs "have no calibration for how confident they are about each statement … other than some sense of how probable that statement is," whereas what makes human beings "intelligent is our ability to reflect on our own state. We have a sense for how confident we are about our own knowledge."

What, in contrast, is the critical fallibility that Helen Vendler exemplifies? It's remarkable that many of the readings that she finds errant are still reproduced by ChatGPT. In a 1994 article, she criticizes readings that emphasize meaning in Shakespeare's sonnets. However, "meaning is not the problem in the sonnets … The problem is why poems witch such very banal apparent meanings … should seem so inexhaustible" ("Shakespeare's Sonnets" 34). From the huge swathes of digital data that trained it, AI offers a meaning-centric reading largely reducing Sonnet 30 to what it says about "memory," "regret," "morality," and so on.

In her book *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Vendler praises Sonnet 30 as a "tour de force" of "[constructing] a richly historical … self" in the space of fourteen lines (*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* 164). Whereas grief can be a stock theme in poetry, Shakespeare makes it "inexhaustible" with his dynamic language. The repetitions of the poem "[draw] generations of readers [into its vortex:] *I summon up . . . Then can I . . . Then can I*—[these phrases] act as a present vertical emotional intensification balancing the horizontally broadening panorama stretching into further panels of the past" (167). Only the human eye can find this vertical aspect by looking at the starting phrases of the sonnet's lines. This intensification also plays out horizontally in "the accelerating intensifications of the [third

quatrain] (grieve-grievances, woe-to-woe, fore-bemoanèd-moan, pay-paid)" (168).

It is crucial to recognize, though, that Vendler's reading of the sonnets is not limited to considering lyric poetry as a "*verbal* work of art," as the critic John Guillory calls it. "Poetry," she argues, "cannot be satisfactorily defined as an art that uses language in a special way" ("The Function of Criticism" 20). This leads to the second distinctive aspect of the human critic: *embodiment*.

That the reader of the sonnet embodies the speaker is clarified by her definition of the lyric, which is "meant to be spoken by its reader as if the reader were the one uttering the words." With the lyric, the reader "[speaks] the lines the writer has written as though they were the reader's own." "We do not listen to [the speaker]; we become him." Therefore, the function of the poetic language in Sonnet 30, "confers on him a 'reality' of prolonged existence that we take on as we speak his words" (*Poems, Poets, Poetry*).

Although further endangered by AI-use only preoccupied with the end-product, Vendler exemplifies a way of embodiment still vital today. "I found it necessary to learn the Sonnets by heart," she wrote. "I would often think I 'knew' a sonnet; but then, scanning it in memory, I would find lacunae" (*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* 11). Her work thus inspired me to memorize Sonnet 30, and it was only then that I could begin embodying and understanding the marriage of emotion and language as I spoke the sonnet as if my own. Thus, fallibility and embodiment go hand in hand, as Vendler and critics in her wake realize the former with the incompleteness of the latter.

I end with Cinque Henderson's tribute to his teacher: "The role of the critic, as Helen embodied it … was not to put herself in front of the poet but to excite her reader to seek out the poet's work," a role which her student names as "commonsense criticism." AI looms large in culture and the minds of students, so much so that they would rather come to LLMs for instant readings rather than "seek out" poetry and live their own "history with the text." "Good reading never lacks a long and taxing history," Vendler wrote in an

essay on Shakespeare. "Our authors are cleverer than we are, and improve on acquaintance." Only the human critic can entice the reader to seek out the sonnets and to live their own "history with the text" ("Shakespeare's Sonnets" 50).

With ahistorical and bodyless blips from ChatGPT, then, students lose out on the final value that Vendler represents: *pleasure*. "The pleasure of being able to hear a new voice," that "what was previously heard as cacophony is now heard as song" ("The Function of Criticism" 28). If critics break out of disciplinary enclaves and reclaim the *common* in commonsense criticism (including wresting the commons away from unartistic technology), our students can take their own voyages to the songs of Shakespeare's sonnets.

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