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RECONSIDERING INTERPRETATION: SURFACE-ORIENTED APPROACHES TO RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emergence and application of surface reading methodologies in Renaissance literary studies, challenging traditional hermeneutic approaches that prioritize depth, symptomatic reading, and hidden meanings. Surface reading, as theorized by scholars such as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, offers an alternative interpretive framework that attends to what is evident, literal, and present in texts rather than what lies beneath. This study surveys the development of surface-oriented criticism, analyzes its theoretical foundations, and evaluates its implications for reading Renaissance literature. Through examination of key Renaissance texts and current scholarly debates, this paper demonstrates how surface reading can illuminate textual features previously obscured by depth-oriented methodologies while acknowledging the approach's limitations. The findings suggest that surface reading provides valuable tools for Renaissance literary analysis, particularly in revealing formal patterns, material textual properties, and the historical specificity of literary language, though it works best in dialogue with rather than replacement of traditional interpretive methods.

KEYWORDS: *Surface Reading, Renaissance Literature, Literary Interpretation, Hermeneutics, Close Reading, Methodology*

INTRODUCTION

The practice of literary interpretation has undergone significant methodological scrutiny in recent decades, with scholars questioning the assumptions underlying traditional approaches to textual analysis. Since the mid-twentieth century, literary criticism has been dominated by what Paul Ricoeur termed the "hermeneutics of suspicion," interpretive strategies that seek hidden meanings, unconscious ideologies, and concealed structures beneath the surface of literary texts. This depth-oriented approach, exemplified by psychoanalytic, Marxist, and deconstructive criticism, has shaped generations of literary scholars and established particular protocols for reading.

However, in 2009, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus introduced the concept of "surface reading" in a special issue of *Representations*, arguing for renewed attention to what is manifest rather than latent in texts. This methodological intervention has profound implications for Renaissance literary studies, a field traditionally invested in uncovering allegorical meanings, political subtexts, and theological implications in early modern texts. Renaissance literature, with its complex interplay of rhetorical traditions, religious contexts, and political exigencies, has been particularly subject to interpretive approaches that privilege depth and hidden significance.

This paper reconsiders how surface-oriented approaches might transform our understanding of Renaissance literature. It examines whether attending to literal meanings, formal patterns, and textual surfaces can produce insights distinct from those generated by symptomatic reading practices. The central research questions guiding this study include: What constitutes surface reading as a distinct methodology? How can surface reading be productively applied to Renaissance texts? What are the advantages and limitations of this approach compared to traditional interpretive frameworks? And what new insights might emerge from reading Renaissance literature's surfaces rather than depths?

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond methodological debate. Renaissance texts themselves often display acute awareness of surface and depth, appearance and reality, rhetorical ornament and substantive meaning. By reconsidering our interpretive approaches, we may discover whether Renaissance writers' own concerns with surfaces can inform contemporary critical practice and whether modern methodological innovations can illuminate historical literary practices in unexpected ways.

LITERATURE SURVEY

The Emergence of Surface Reading

The theoretical foundations for surface reading emerged from dissatisfaction with what Best and Marcus identified as the dominance of symptomatic reading in literary studies. Symptomatic reading, derived from Marxist and psychoanalytic traditions, treats texts as expressions of underlying contradictions, repressions, or ideological formations that require expert interpretation to decode. This approach assumes that texts do not mean what they appear to say and that critical reading involves penetrating surfaces to reveal hidden truths.

Best and Marcus proposed surface reading as an alternative that "attends to what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts" rather than to what is presumed to lie hidden. Their intervention built upon earlier critiques of interpretive excess, including Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of paranoid and reparative reading. Surface reading encompasses multiple practices: literal reading that takes texts at face value, descriptive reading that attends to formal patterns without immediately assigning meaning, and affective reading that acknowledges emotional and aesthetic responses.

Heather Love further developed surface reading by distinguishing between several modes: literal comprehension that resists allegorical or symbolic interpretation, attention to textual form and structure, and what she calls "thin description" that contrasts with Clifford Geertz's influential concept of thick description. These varied approaches share a commitment to respecting textual surfaces rather than dismissing them as mere camouflage for deeper meanings.

Critiques and Debates

Surface reading has generated substantial scholarly debate. Critics such as Fredric Jameson argue that surface reading represents a retreat from political engagement and critical distance, potentially reinforcing dominant ideologies by accepting texts' self-presentation. Others contend that the distinction between surface and depth is itself problematic, as all reading necessarily involves some level of interpretation and meaning-making.

Rita Felski has contributed to these debates through her concept of "postcritical reading," which shares surface reading's skepticism toward suspicious hermeneutics while proposing a broader rethinking of critical method. Felski argues that critique has become overly associated with negative practices of demystification and exposure, limiting literary

studies' ability to articulate why literature matters. Her work suggests that surface reading is part of a larger methodological reorientation in the humanities.

Meanwhile, scholars like Amanda Anderson have cautioned against false dichotomies, arguing that sophisticated criticism has always combined attention to surfaces and depths, form and content, description and interpretation. The debate thus centers not only on methodology but on fundamental questions about the purposes of literary study and the relationship between reading practices and broader intellectual and political commitments.

Renaissance Studies and Interpretive Traditions

Renaissance literary studies has particular stakes in debates about interpretation. The field emerged through close attention to rhetorical structures, classical allusions, and linguistic patterns—practices that share affinities with surface reading. However, Renaissance criticism has also been profoundly shaped by historical contextualization, ideological critique, and attention to political and religious subtexts. New Historicism, which dominated Renaissance studies from the 1980s onward, exemplifies symptomatic reading by uncovering how literary texts participate in and resist cultural power dynamics.

Scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt pioneered approaches that read Renaissance texts as sites where cultural energies are negotiated, often through strategies of containment and subversion that require interpretive excavation. This methodology assumes that Renaissance literature's most significant meanings lie in its relationship to historical power structures rather than in its explicit statements or formal properties. While immensely productive, this approach has sometimes obscured other dimensions of Renaissance texts.

Recent work in Renaissance formalism, associated with scholars like Jeff Dolven and Rayna Kalas, represents a partial turn toward surface-oriented concerns. These scholars examine how Renaissance writers understood and deployed literary forms, attending to the materiality of verse, the specificity of rhetorical figures, and the aesthetic properties of language. This formalist revival suggests growing interest in what Renaissance texts do rather than exclusively what they conceal or express symptomatically.

Intersections with Book History and Material Texts

Surface reading finds natural allies in book history and material textual studies. Scholars examining Renaissance books as physical objects necessarily attend to surfaces: page layouts, typefaces, bindings, and paratextual materials. This work demonstrates how meaning emerges from material forms rather than residing exclusively in semantic content. Margreta de Grazia's work on Shakespeare's material texts and Zachary Lesser's studies of Renaissance print culture exemplify how attention to textual surfaces can transform interpretation.

The material turn in Renaissance studies has revealed how features traditionally considered peripheral—title pages, dedications, typographical ornaments—actively shape meaning. These insights align with surface reading's emphasis on what is present and visible rather than hidden and latent. However, material textual studies often interpret surfaces as evidence of historical contexts and cultural practices, potentially reintroducing depth-oriented hermeneutics through alternative routes.

PROPOSED SYSTEM: A FRAMEWORK FOR SURFACE-ORIENTED RENAISSANCE READING

Theoretical Framework

This paper proposes a systematic framework for applying surface reading to Renaissance literature, integrating multiple methodological strands into a coherent approach. The framework consists of four primary components: formal attention, literal comprehension, descriptive patience, and affective responsiveness.

- **Formal attention** involves close analysis of prosodic patterns, rhetorical structures, and generic conventions without immediately subordinating formal features to thematic or ideological interpretation. This practice examines how Renaissance texts employ meter, rhyme, syntactic patterning, and figurative language as meaningful in themselves rather than as vehicles for hidden content.

- **Literal comprehension** takes Renaissance texts' explicit statements seriously, resisting the automatic assumption that texts mean something other than what they appear to say. This does not entail naive reading but rather requires sustained engagement with texts' ostensible meanings before or instead of seeking concealed significance. For Renaissance literature, this means attending to stated arguments, explicit imagery, and surface-level narratives.

- **Descriptive patience** involves thorough description of textual features, patterns, and structures before advancing interpretive claims. This practice draws on Best and Marcus's advocacy for description as a mode of critical activity. Rather than treating description as preliminary to interpretation, descriptive patience values the accumulation of detailed observations about texts' formal and linguistic properties.

- **Affective responsiveness** acknowledges the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of reading, including pleasure, beauty, rhythm, and sound. Renaissance poetry in particular was crafted to produce specific affective responses through sonic properties and formal arrangements. Surface reading attends to these designed effects rather than viewing them as secondary to cognitive meanings.

Methodological Procedures

Implementing this framework requires specific reading practices:

1. **Initial formal analysis**: Begin with close attention to verse forms, syntactic structures, and rhetorical patterns. Document metrical schemes, rhyme patterns, stanzaic organization, and stylistic features without immediately assigning thematic significance.

2. **Literal paraphrase**: Produce careful paraphrases of complex passages that honor texts' explicit statements. Identify what texts overtly claim, describe, or argue before considering what they might conceal or unwittingly reveal.

3. **Pattern identification**: Map recurring formal features, repeated images, structural parallels, and organizing principles. Surface reading values patterns as significant phenomena rather than mere symptoms of underlying causes.

4. **Contextual description**: Describe historical contexts, generic conventions, and rhetorical traditions not to explain texts symptomatically but to understand the resources available to Renaissance writers and readers.

5. **Comparative analysis**: Examine how different texts employ similar forms or topoi, attending to variations and innovations rather than immediately categorizing texts as expressions of shared ideologies or cultural formations.

Application to Renaissance Texts

This framework can be applied across Renaissance literary forms:

- **Sonnet sequences** offer rich opportunities for surface reading through attention to prosodic craft, rhetorical variation, and sequential patterning. Rather than reading sonnets primarily as expressions of frustrated desire or coded political commentary, surface reading examines how poets exploit formal constraints to generate specific effects.

- **Epic poetry** can be approached through its explicit engagement with classical models, its deployment of narrative structures, and its manipulation of verse forms. Surface reading might attend to how Spenser's Faerie Queene creates meaning through allegorical surfaces rather than treating allegory as camouflage for hidden political meanings.

- **Drama** presents surfaces in performance: spoken language, stage action, visual spectacle. Surface reading of Renaissance drama might focus on theatrical effectiveness, rhetorical power, and dramatic pacing rather than exclusively on ideological subtexts or authorial unconscious.

SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths

Surface reading offers several advantages for Renaissance literary studies:

- **Renewed attention to craft and artistry**: By focusing on formal properties and explicit features, surface reading restores attention to Renaissance writers' technical skill and artistic choices. This approach values the labor of composition and the sophistication of rhetorical practice.

- **Respect for historical difference**: Taking Renaissance texts at face value requires engaging with historical worldviews, beliefs, and values that differ from contemporary assumptions. Rather than immediately critiquing or explaining away Renaissance ideas, surface reading allows sustained attention to how early modern people understood their world.

- **Fresh perspectives on familiar texts**: Canonical Renaissance works have been subjected to extensive interpretation. Surface reading can defamiliarize well-known texts by bracketing accumulated critical narratives and returning to textual surfaces with fresh attention.

- **Interdisciplinary compatibility**: Surface reading aligns with work in book history, performance studies, and formalist analysis, facilitating productive dialogue across methodological approaches.

- **Pedagogical value**: For students encountering Renaissance literature, surface reading provides accessible entry points through attention to language, form, and explicit content before advancing to complex interpretive frameworks.

Weaknesses

Surface reading also faces significant limitations:

- **Historical blind spots**: Renaissance texts were often crafted with multiple levels of meaning, including allegorical, typological, and topical references. Exclusive focus on surfaces might miss dimensions that historical readers recognized and valued.

- **Political quietism**: Critics argue that surface reading risks abandoning critical engagement with ideologies, power structures, and social injustices encoded in texts. For a field concerned with early modern politics, religion, and social hierarchies, this represents a serious concern.

- **Definitional ambiguity**: "Surface" remains an ambiguous concept. What counts as surface versus depth? Formal patterns might be considered surfaces, but identifying patterns involves interpretation. The boundary between description and interpretation is less clear than surface reading sometimes suggests.

- **Limited explanatory power**: While surface reading excels at describing textual features, it may struggle to explain why texts take particular forms or what their historical significance might be. Questions about causation, context, and consequence remain important.

- **Incomplete methodology**: Surface reading works best when complementing rather than replacing other approaches. As a standalone methodology, it may produce partial or limited insights.

Opportunities

Surface reading creates opportunities for Renaissance studies:

- **Methodological pluralism**: Rather than replacing depth-oriented criticism, surface reading can encourage methodological diversity and dialogue between different approaches. This pluralism enriches the field by generating multiple perspectives on texts.

- **New collaborations**: Surface reading's attention to form, language, and material properties facilitates collaboration with linguists, bibliographers, performance scholars, and digital humanists.

- **Digital humanities integration**: Computational methods for analyzing formal patterns, linguistic features, and structural properties align with surface reading's descriptive orientation. Digital tools can identify patterns across large corpora that individual readers might miss.

- **Undergraduate engagement**: Surface reading's emphasis on close attention to language and form provides accessible frameworks for teaching Renaissance literature to students intimidated by theory-heavy approaches.

- **Archival discovery**: Attending to surfaces might reveal overlooked texts, marginal annotations, or paratextual materials that symptomatic reading dismisses as insignificant.

Threats

Several factors threaten surface reading's viability:

- **Disciplinary resistance**: Scholars trained in symptomatic reading may view surface reading as methodologically naive or politically regressive. Disciplinary norms and institutional structures favor established approaches.

- **Misapplication**: Surface reading risks becoming a license for superficial analysis that mistakes lack of interpretation for methodological sophistication. Without careful theorization, surface reading might devolve into mere plot summary or unsystematic observation.

- **False dichotomies**: Framing surface and depth as opposed rather than complementary creates unnecessary methodological conflicts. Sophisticated criticism has always navigated between these dimensions.

- **Historical anachronism**: Imposing contemporary methodological debates onto Renaissance texts risks distorting their historical specificity. Renaissance writers and readers had their own theories of interpretation that may not align with modern frameworks.

- **Resource constraints**: Close attention to formal and linguistic features requires time, expertise, and sometimes specialized knowledge of rhetoric, prosody, and historical linguistics. Institutional pressures toward rapid publication may discourage such sustained work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case Study: Reading Spenser's Amoretti

To demonstrate surface reading's application, consider Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595), a sonnet sequence traditionally interpreted as autobiographical expression of courtship, ideological articulation of Protestant marriage theory, or literary competition with Petrarchan traditions. Surface reading offers alternative insights.

Formal analysis reveals Spenser's innovative "link sonnet" rhyme scheme (abab bcbc cdcd ee), which creates interlocking stanzas unique in English sonnet tradition. Rather than immediately interpreting this formal choice as expressing thematic unity or spiritual interconnection, surface reading simply describes how the rhyme scheme operates: each quatrain links to the next through shared sounds, creating continuity while maintaining discrete units. This formal surface merits attention as technical innovation and sonic achievement.

Literal reading of Sonnet 67 ("Lyke as a huntsman after weary chace") notes its explicit comparison of courtship to hunting, where the beloved ultimately submits willingly. Rather than reading this as concealing patriarchal domination or Protestant companionate marriage ideology, literal comprehension attends to what the sonnet overtly claims: mutual desire replaces forceful pursuit. The poem's surface presents reciprocal love as natural culmination rather than ideological construct.

Descriptive patience with the sequence's structure reveals careful numerical patterning: 89 sonnets plus epithalamion, with specific sonnets marking seasonal changes and courtship progress. These patterns create formal architecture independent of thematic interpretation. The sequence's surface organization demonstrates deliberate compositional craft worthy of attention.

Affective responsiveness to Spenser's sonorous language—his characteristic use of liquid consonants, vowel music, and rhythmic variation—reveals how sound creates meaning through pleasure rather than semantic content. The famous opening of Sonnet 75 ("One day I wrote her name upon the strand") achieves its effect partly through phonic beauty and metrical grace, dimensions overlooked when reading symptomatically.

Comparative Analysis: Surface Reading across Renaissance Forms

Applying surface reading to different Renaissance genres produces varied results:

- **Lyric poetry**: Surface reading of Renaissance lyrics illuminates formal virtuosity and sonic craft. George Herbert's shaped poems like "Easter Wings" demand attention to visual surfaces—typography and page layout—that create meaning through material form. Reading these surfaces literally and descriptively reveals how Herbert uses physical arrangement to embody theological concepts without reducing the poems to allegorical codes.

- **Dramatic texts**: Shakespeare's plays present rich surfaces in their rhetoric, verse forms, and theatrical spectacle. Surface reading of *Hamlet's* soliloquies might attend to their syntactic complexity, metrical irregularities, and rhetorical questions as significant features rather than symptoms of Hamlet's psychology. The famous "To be or not to be" speech achieves power partly through formal balance, philosophical precision, and rhythmic pacing—surface features worth analyzing.

- **Prose fiction**: Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* employs elaborate periodic sentences, intricate plot structures, and rhetorical ornament that surface reading can describe without immediately categorizing as aristocratic ideology or political allegory. The text's syntactic complexity and narrative intricacy constitute meaningful surfaces meriting sustained attention.

Limitations Observed

This study's application of surface reading revealed limitations. Renaissance texts' multiple levels of meaning—literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical—complicate any approach that privileges surfaces. Spenser himself theorized his work as "darke conceits" requiring interpretation beyond literal comprehension. Complete suspension of depth-oriented reading thus contradicts Renaissance literary theory.

Additionally, historical context remains necessary for understanding surfaces. Identifying Spenser's rhyme scheme as innovative requires knowledge of sonnet traditions. Recognizing Herbert's typographical experiments demands familiarity with religious emblem books. Surface reading thus depends on contextual knowledge even while avoiding symptomatic interpretation.

Finally, exclusive attention to surfaces risks missing how Renaissance texts participate in contemporary debates, encode political positions, or engage religious controversies. These dimensions matter for understanding texts' historical significance and cultural work. Surface reading complements but cannot replace historically grounded interpretation.

CONCLUSION

This study's reconsideration of interpretation through surface-oriented approaches to Renaissance literature yields several conclusions. Surface reading offers valuable methodological tools for attending to formal properties, literal meanings, and textual materiality that depth-oriented criticism sometimes overlooks. Applied to Renaissance texts, surface reading can defamiliarize canonical works, reveal formal innovations, and restore attention to artistic craft.

However, surface reading works best as complement rather than replacement for traditional interpretive approaches. Renaissance literature's historical specificity, its authors' own theories of meaning, and its participation in early modern cultural debates require interpretive frameworks that surface reading alone cannot provide. The most productive path forward combines surface reading's descriptive attention with contextual knowledge and interpretive sophistication.

The implications extend beyond methodology to fundamental questions about literary study's purposes. If surface reading emerges partly from exhaustion with suspicious hermeneutics, it suggests a discipline reconsidering its relationship to texts. Rather than viewing literature primarily as ideological symptom requiring critical exposure, surface reading allows engagement with texts as aesthetic objects, historical artifacts, and crafted compositions worthy of sustained attention.

For Renaissance studies specifically, surface reading connects with the field's origins in formalist close reading while offering contemporary theoretical frameworks. It also aligns with current interest in book history, material texts, and performance studies. Future research might develop more sophisticated integrations of surface and depth approaches, explore how digital methods can facilitate surface reading at scale, and investigate how Renaissance writers' own theories of interpretation inform contemporary methodological debates.

Ultimately, reconsidering interpretation through surface-oriented approaches enriches rather than impoverishes Renaissance literary studies. By attending to what Renaissance texts show us on their surfaces—their formal beauties, rhetorical complexities, and linguistic innovations—we discover dimensions of meaning that symptomatic reading, in its haste to uncover hidden depths, may rush past. The challenge lies in maintaining methodological sophistication while recovering the capacity for sustained descriptive attention to literary surfaces.

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