Spurious Response

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In 2001, *Journal of Science* revealed an interesting view about Shakespeare: he smoked drugs. With permission from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, researchers launched chemical investigations into Shakespeare’s house and found traces of cocaine and hallucinogenic drugs in the pipes. Immediately, the media “drug-lobbied” for evidence of Shakespeare’s drug usage (Pinching 9). David Pinching asserts that such a search is another example of modern journalism degenerating established figures (9). In “Shakespeare and Narcotics,” Pinching employs an assumption that journalists overreact to the discovery of Shakespeare’s drug ingestion and uses the pronoun “we” to mislead his audience in believing that modern journalists contribute Shakespeare’s literary genius to drugs.

Pinching makes hasty assumptions about journalists to mislead the audience into believing that journalists overreact to celebrity gossips. Throughout his essay, Pinching makes statements that assume modern journalists “lather” into “fervent discussion” in the matter of controversial discoveries about established figures and criticize those figures (9). According to his observation, journalists go so far in scavenging for evidence of drug influence on Shakespeare’s work that they present “entirely innocuous” phrases as evidence: journalists provided “noted weed” and “compounds strange” as evidence of Shakespeare’s drug addiction, but according to context, “noted weed” means “famous type of clothing” and “compounds strange” is just an intentional word arrangement to make the phrase sound exotic (9). Pinching’s premise also appears where Pinching explains how magazines and websites “naturally” responded to the drug discovery with doubts about Shakespeare’s talent. He is arguing that it is in the media’s natural interest to ruin a figure’s reputation because such news can spur “amusement and indignation” that will attract more readers (9). Pulling down an established figure is an easier way to attract readers than creating a sophisticated article. The problem with Pinching’s assumption is that it only repeats the statement of how modern journalism aims to “knock figures off their high horse,” but it doesn’t further develop its logic (10). For a stronger argument, Pinching could have provided evidence of different views about media’s reaction and refute them or provide concrete examples of how frequently the media condemn celebrities and how potent such criticisms are.

Pinching further makes assumptions about how journalists purposefully selected information and images to bring Shakespeare down.
According to Pinching, the journalists “studiously” avoided the fact that drug usage was common during Shakespeare’s time (9). Pinching’s presumption may be true, but the media may have reacted “naturally” to the discovery or disregarded the fact about the past because drug usage itself is such a controversial topic nowadays. According to him, journalists “would like to imagine Shakespeare, spliff in mouth” or “freebasing and rolling up joints because they see him as an establishment figure” (9). Pinching’s descriptions depict Shakespeare as a heavy drug addict that would even “make the Beatles blush” (9). The vivid image of Shakespeare smoking drug gives the audience a sense of disgust and distrust. Such illustrations, however, fall into Pinching’s intentional appeal to emotion to state that journalists’ view about Shakespeare is corrupt.

Another strategy Pinching uses to appeal to his audience is pronoun usage. Pinching separates the audience from the journalists by using first person pronouns to refer to the audience and himself, while using third person pronouns to refer the journalists. Pinching first states that the audience and himself are also part of the West culture of “[degrading] the great and promote and sensational” by saying such a trait is “our attitude” and “our simultaneous and hypocritical prudishness and excess.” Then Pinching separates himself and his audience from the journalists (9). He distinguishes that “we,” him and his audience, don’t make as big a deal about Shakespeare’s drug usage as the journalists do: “What we are effectively saying in insisting that Shakespeare probably smoked drugs is that given the task to trying to write all the plays Shakespeare did we would probably turn to narcotics” (10). Pinching further discriminates between the audience and the journalists by referring the latter as “those” and “people,”: “those who like to degrade,” “people like to imagine Shakespeare freebasing,” and “people have problem accepting that one man wrote so much” (10). By separating the audience from the journalists, Pinching tries to prove that journalists ridiculously overreact to the 2001 discovery. By referring to the audience as “we” instead of “you,” Pinching tries to relate to the audience, make them feel comfortable, and represent himself as credible.

It may be true that Shakespeare smoking drugs does not change the fact that his plays are brilliant. Maybe the media is wasting time on focusing on a less-than-worthwhile issue. But with lack of deeper logic, Pinching’s approach to the media’s “lather” and “desperate kafuffle” embodies the exaggeration itself.
Work Cited