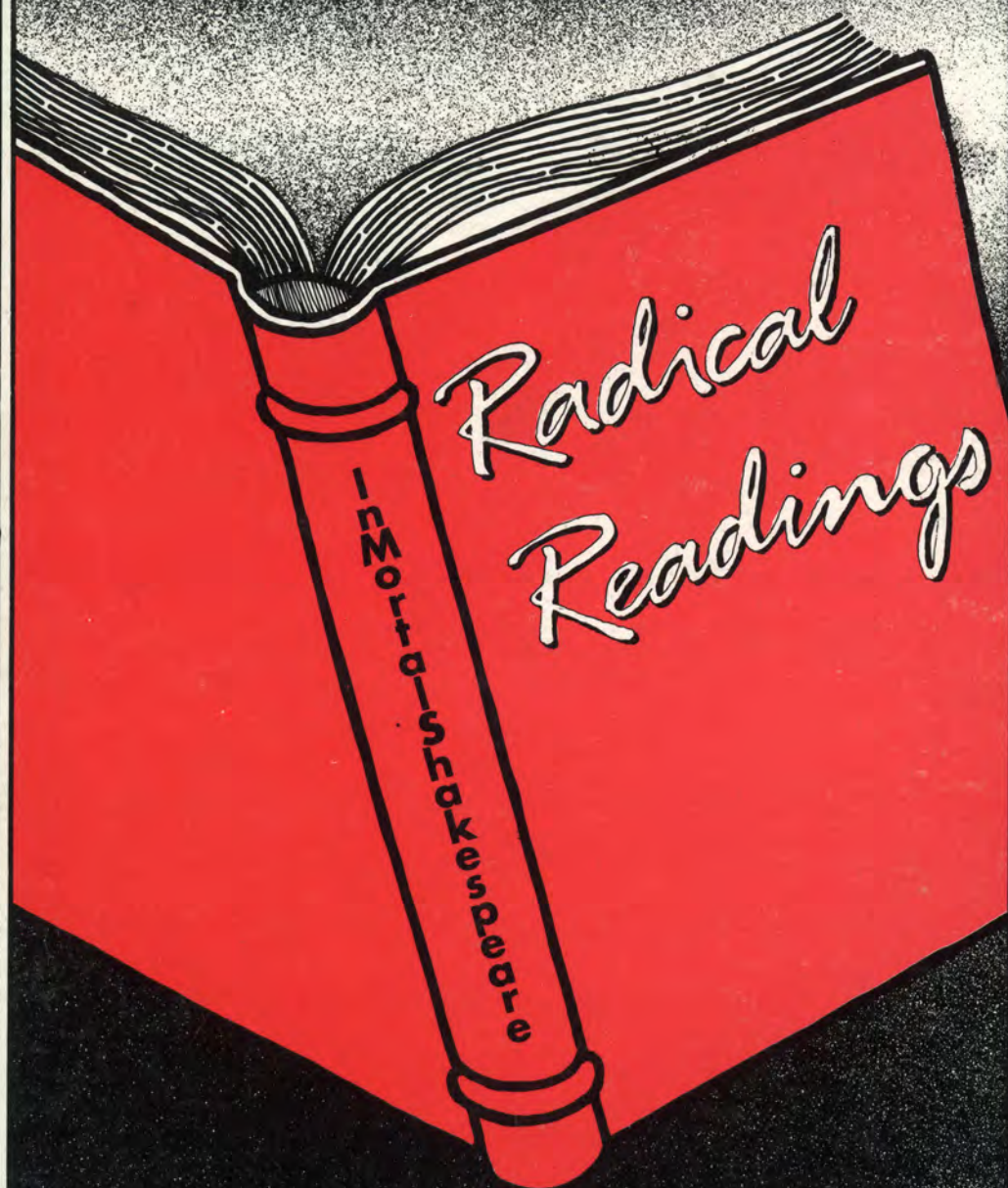


Ed. MANUEL BARBEITO



UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

# IN MORTAL SHAKESPEARE

Radical Readings



Unit  
UNIVERSIDADE  
COMPOSTELA



**CURSOS E CONGRESOS  
DA UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA**

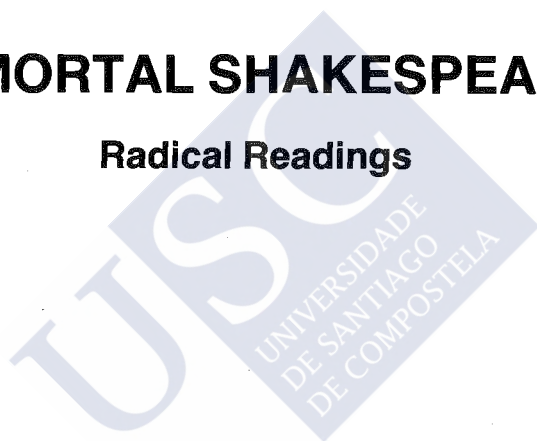
**58**



Ed. MANUEL BARBEITO

# **IN MORTAL SHAKESPEARE**

**Radical Readings**



1989

UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

In mortal Shakespeare: Radical readings / Ed. Manuel Barbeito. — Santiago de Compostela : Universidade. Servicio de Publicacións e Intercambio Científico, 1989. — 99 p. ; 24 cm. — (Cursos e Congresos da Universidade de Santiago de Compostela ; 58). — Índice: p.7. — D.L.: C.408-1989. — ISBN 84-7191-502-2

I. Barbeito, Manuel, ed.lit., II. Universidade de Santiago de Compostela. Servicio de Publicacións e Intercambio Científico, ed.

820.07 SHAKESPEARE, William

© Universidade de  
Santiago de Compostela, 1989

**IMPRIME:** IMPRENTA UNIVERSITARIA  
Campus Universitario  
Pavillón de Servicios

**EDITA:** SERVICIO DE PUBLICACIÓN S E INTERCAMBIO CIENTÍFICO  
DA UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA  
Campus Universitario.

**Depósito Legal:** C-408-1989  
**ISBN:** 84-7191-502-2

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

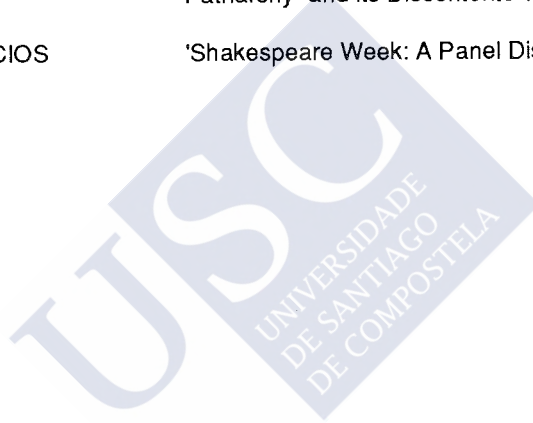
On behalf of the Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, I want to thank the following institutions for their financial assistance: Caja de Ahorros de Galicia, British Council, Vicerrectorado de Investigación, and Facultad de Filología. I also want express my personal gratitude to Miss Deborah Henderson and Mr. Javier Crespán for their continuous help and encouragement.





## CONTENTS

|                    |                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MANUEL BARBEITO    | Introduction ..... 9                                                                                                    |
| TERENCE HAWKES     | 'Recent Critical Approaches to Shakespeare's<br>Tragic Plays' ..... 25                                                  |
| JONATHAN DOLLIMORE | The Case for a Political/Cultural Analysis of<br>Shakespeare: The Instances of<br>Displacement and Perversion' ..... 35 |
| ALAN SINFIELD      | 'Othello and the Politics of Character' ..... 51                                                                        |
| JOHN DRAKAKIS      | 'The Merchant of Venice: or Christian<br>Patriarchy and its Discontents' ..... 69                                       |
| MANUELA PALACIOS   | 'Shakespeare Week: A Panel Discussion' ..... 95                                                                         |





A conference on William Shakespeare took place during the second week of November, 1987, in Saint Jacques of Compostela. This event was the first of a general project which plans periodically to gather specialists to discuss the new readings generated by the latest theretico-methodological developments in the field of literary studies. This volume includes the four papers read at conference and a synthesis of the debates that took place both in the seminars and in the round table which closed the 'Shakespeare Week'.

The specialists invited to this first meeting belong to a tendency in recent English literary criticism characterized by the interest it shows in literary theory and its development in the continent. In this sense, it can be seen as an against-the-tide movement in the English critical panorama of the twentieth century dominated by New Criticism. During the last ten years or so this interest in theory has been steadily growing as reflected by the appearance of collections like *New Accents* and journals such as *The London Review of Books*. The former is founded with the express aim of introducing the non-initiated reader to the new advances in theory and method. The latter, though not originally created to promote interest in theory, has in time become an excellent means of spreading the word through the debate carried out in its pages on central theoretical issues<sup>1</sup>.

This tendency originated as a belated response to the questions brought up by the general debate held in Europe, especially from the middle sixties onwards, characterized by a reinterpretation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers whose work led to the revolution in human sciences at the turn of the century. This re-reading is what sets off the so called Post-structuralism, the most outstanding figures of structuralism, such as R. Barthes, M. Foucault, J. Lacan, and J. Derrida having engaged in it. England, therefore, does not receive structuralism itself, but the impact of the complex theoretical debate generated by the structuralist movement, too hastily sentenced to death by some. We should bear in mind, though, that the reception of Post-structuralism in England is not inscribed on 'tabula rasa' but that, on the contrary, it has as its background the English Studies dominated, as we have already pointed out, by 'New Criticism', so that the reaction against this latter movement is an important link that unites the new currents.

---

1.- Alan Sinfield pointed out to me the importance of The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham.

The specialists we have invited to start our project, though not members of a school in the strict sense of the word, do share a common interest: Marxism. This makes them polemical figures in the field of literary criticism because their interest in Marxism determines the assumption of a radical stance in their views on the function of both criticism and literature. It should be noted from the start that this radical stance is directly linked to the central concern of aesthetics, the relation between reality and the work of art.

It could be argued that this radical intention is shared by theories other than Marxism. But no other alternative reaches the same degree of radicality, because Marxism not only aims at bringing about a theoretical revolution, but also at a practical one. Of course it could also be argued that any theory necessarily performs a kind of practice. But this is precisely the point. The real difference lies in the concept of practice. Marxist practice is, first of all, radical because it refuses to remain immured within the confines of the academy. But the radicality of Marxist practice derives too from the central place this concept occupies in the whole system. In Marxism, theory and practice merge into the concept of 'praxis'. We are no longer presented first with an aseptic theory, in a pure state, which can afterwards be put into practice, or the converse, a practice which is thereafter abstracted into a theory. Marxism's goal is to provide a scientific analysis of history which leads to the transformation of society because it reveals both its necessity and the main lines of action that are to be followed in order to achieve it.

For Marxism, therefore, the word 'radical' has a twofold meaning which springs from its own etymology. Something is radical, firstly, because it gets to the root of things, and secondly, because it affects them there. Both aspects are essential to the meaning of the word: one must have a scientific knowledge of reality in order to be able to transform it. In other words, the scientific knowledge of reality shows both the necessity for and the rules of change. We can see in this a basic characteristic of Marxist criticism which is specially relevant today; it cannot be reduced to the type of negative critique so fashionable in the twentieth century, because the positive proposal of a goal to be achieved is inherent to it.

In the following pages I will attempt to unfold the implications of this radicality concentrating on some of what I consider to be the key points necessary in order to achieve an understanding of Marxism as a new way of facing the world and, as a consequence, of practising literary criticism and theory.

---

2.- A. Sánchez Vázquez, *Filosofía de la Praxis* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1972). (All translations from the Spanish editions of the texts quoted in this introduction are mine).

## 1) From being to doing

'Philosophers have limited themselves to interpret the world in different ways. The point is to transform it.'

Marx, 'Thesis on Feuerbach', XI.

This thesis sums up the meaning of Marxist praxis and involves a radical criticism of the traditional philosophical stance. It asserts both the necessary transformation of theory so that it itself becomes transforming, and the necessity of abandoning any notion of reflection that, even when active, as in Hegel's system, is crippled by its circumscription to the level of consciousness, in favour of one that becomes a true agent in history. This transformation is so radical that it means the death of philosophy. It implies that conscience is no longer understood as an energy itself capable of moving history, the dream of philosophy's total fulfilment. This energy now lies in the masses, and only when, according to Marx, conscience takes root in them, does it become a true historical agent.

This certainly affects the very foundations of reality, and therefore, of literary studies too. Instead of taking the work of art as an autonomous being, theory as a kind of ontology that broods about it, the act of reading as an ecstasy in its contemplation, and literary criticism as a sort of purger of the impurities that hinder the ecstasy, the work of art becomes a historical being, historically constructed. Theory is now concerned with this making, and criticism with contributing to it. From mystical being we turn to practical doing<sup>3</sup>.

From this first thesis derives a radical criticism of some of the basic principles of dominant ideology also manifest in literary studies. We will first consider Marxist criticism of two central concepts in the bourgeois idea of man: those of the individual and of freedom. Second, the terminological substitution of genius-author for writer, to which Marxism has decisively contributed through its criticism of these concepts.

## 2) On Marxist antihumanism.

'Human essence isn't something abstract and immanent to each individual. It is, actually, the whole system of social relations.'

Marx, 'Thesis on Feuerbach', VI.

---

3.- Cfr. Jane p. Tompkin's definition of the Twentieth Century conception of art: 'The first requirement of a work of art in the 20th Century is that it should do nothing.' 'The Reader in History', in *Reader-Response Criticism* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 210.

The attribute 'antihumanism' is shared by other central contemporary currents of thought, such as structuralism, and it constitutes a violent attack on the central tenets of liberal humanism. No wonder then that liberal humanists may ascribe connotations of in-humanism to the word. 'Antihuman', though, has nothing to do with 'in-human'. It is the rejection of the bourgeois, 'humanist', idea of man built on a basis which was certainly radical in its origins, the placing of man in the centre of reality, so displacing the medieval God from this privileged position. In spite of this, the bourgeois' substitution of God for man in the centre leaves the centre itself intact. If God was the Lord of human destiny before, now it is man who becomes the subject of his own history. But the death of God, as Nietzsche's profound insight discovers, means the death of man too<sup>4</sup>.

Neither the universal, man, nor its correlative particular, the bourgeois individual, can be taken to constitute the subject of history. As Marx points out

'Anyone who, like me, understands the development of the socio-economic formation as a historic-natural process, cannot make the individual responsible for the existence of relations out of which he himself is born, though subjectively he may consider himself much above them.'<sup>5</sup>

The fact that antihumanism continues to be seen nowadays as a threat to man, reveals the manipulation of bourgeois ideology, and at the same time the good services that liberal humanism pays to the capitalist system.

The Marxist critic here confronts his dual task: on the one hand, in its negative aspect, to discover the foundations of the idea of man produced by bourgeois ideology; on the other, its positive side, to approach concrete men in their real life conditions. As Althusser puts it

'...it does not mean that M.L. loses sight of real men for a single moment. On the contrary, in order to see them as they really are and liberate them from class exploitation, M.L. must realize this revolution: to get rid of bourgeois ideology of man as subject of history, to get rid of "man"''<sup>6</sup>.

In Marxism, real life conditions play a determinant role and are, in turn, determined by the material conditions of production. The central assertion of Marxism, as far as the idea of man is concerned, is that, in the last resort, it is

---

4.- Gilles Deleuze, 'Nietzsche', in *Spinoza, Nietzsche, Kant* (Barcelona: Labor, 1974).

5.- Carlos Marx, *El Capital* (Mexico: Fondo Cultura Economica, 1978), t. I, p. xv.

6.- Louis Althusser, *Para una Crítica de la práctica teórica. Respuesta a John Lewis* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1974), p. 36. 'M.L.' stands for Marxist Leninism.

these conditions that create his 'nature', or rather, that there is no ideal/transcendental human nature existing beyond them

'As individuals manifest their lives, so they are. What they are coincides, therefore, with what they produce as much as with how they produce it. What the individuals are depends then on their material conditions of production.'<sup>7</sup>

### 3) Determinism and freedom

'It is not consciousness that determines existence, but, on the contrary, existence determines consciousness.'

Marx, *German Ideology*.

Freedom and consciousness constitute the very essence of responsible human action according to bourgeois thought. But the work of the social sciences and psychology towards the end of the last century and at the beginning of this effects a crucial displacement of that definition. It is not so much a question of denying liberty and consciousness as characteristic of human acts, but rather of removing them from the central position they occupied.

We will be able to throw light onto this displacement if we relate it to the contradiction between determinism and freedom so as to see it in the broader context of our culture. We find in it three last instances which have successively been taken to determine the course of history: God, Nature, economy.

In the Middle Ages it was God who ultimately steered the course of history. In the passage to Modern Age, the relationship between Providence and freedom, that is, between knowledge and the decision on the course to be followed by history, be it universal or personal, becomes a source of continuous struggle that will eventually contribute to the split in Christendom.

Protestantism appears with the crisis out of which a new last instance, infirm at first, is born. Man is this new instance and the extreme difficulty of making divine providence compatible with human freedom arises with his emergence as such. Catholicism, though, avoids the problem by sticking to the traditional solution. For Catholicism, man is essentially eternal, a subject in history, though not historical, whose decisive choice is between keeping what he is in essence or abandoning this for what is no more than a transitory circumstance. For Protestantism, on the contrary, man is the historical subject of history, outside of which he has no essence whatsoever to preserve; he is what he makes of himself, all his choices lying within the scope of history. The

---

7.- Carlos Marx, *La Ideología Alemana* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Pueblos Unidos, 1975), pp. 19-20.

conflict necessarily arises when the transcendental figure of Providence is retained. Is the human creature a mere instrument of the divine plan -thus ceasing from being a true subject of history- or, on the contrary, as subject of his own making, does he ground his freedom of action on his knowledge of reality -thus doing without Providence? In this sense, the idea of Providence and of the historical subject become mutually exclusive, simply because they are corresponding mirror images. The union of knowledge-action constitutes both of them as last instances.

The complex problem of predestination disappears with the Romantic divinization of human nature. Once human nature itself becomes transcendent the contradiction disappears. The course of history is no longer connected with a divine plan above both nature and history, but with Destiny which, inscribed in the human heart, is accessible to the poet-prophet who sings it in his poetry. Therefore, the new last instance is now ripe, the natural law in perfect harmony with the moral law. We should bear in mind, though, that transcendence remains as the quality that this last instance shares with the previous one, whose place it has come to occupy.

What Marxism crucially does is to propose a scientific explanation of history which, as such, rejects any kind of transcendence. The last instance is now economy<sup>8</sup>, and the new key concepts are the forces and relations of production. Whether Marxist analysis is accepted or not this must be conceded, it is the inauguration of a radically new approach to history.

Marxism inherits from the modern tradition the relation between knowledge and historical action. Only the knowledge of reality makes intervention in the course of history possible. In Engels' words, freedom is the consciousness of necessity. Without this knowledge free human action becomes pure fantasy, an ideological device in service of the dominant class, since it is bereft of its original power once its link with reality, knowledge, is broken.

Once the material conditions of existence are underlined, the bourgeois individual is exposed as a puppet-subject of history. If a human being is to direct in any way the transformation of reality, he must first know how it works, and he will find that it does so independent of him. He can only become a true subject after he stops pretending to be such, when he realizes that nothing transcendental, neither Providence nor its correlative, the bourgeois human subject, leads and moves history. It is in the masses that the energy to move history lies and this energy is activated by consciousness when it takes root in

---

8.- Anthony Giddens suggests dropping the 'last instance' altogether and limits the autonomous working of economy and its determinant role in the transformation of society to the advent of capitalism. 'Contradiction, Power, Historical Materialism', in *Central Problems in Social Theory*. (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 154. I use this expression to show the ideological transformations in the interpretation of reality.

them; that is, when a social class, for instance the proletariat, finding it accomplishes the conditions required at a given historical moment to head the necessary transformation of reality, takes over, thereby becoming a true historical agent.

This is the adequate frame to deal with the question of freedom in Marxism. Only an interested misreading which imposes on Marxism old-fashioned schema foreign to it will try to prove an incompatibility between determinism and freedom in it. Freedom is not something abstract, like the bourgeois ideal, but concrete, and it may only be realized in given material conditions which determine its limits<sup>9</sup>. Just as one cannot say, according to this, that a man is free in jail only because he is a human being, likewise, it cannot be maintained that this essential principle exists in individual men regardless of their conditions of life. But this is exactly what bourgeois ideology tries to sell: the guarantee of an unconditional freedom and of the possibility of its realization in a social system ideally based on respect for the free and independent individual, an independence materialized of course in private property, made in turn the greatest expression of capitalism. In this sense, isolated individuals in their cells are free because they are human - because human beings are naturally free. 'Laissez faire', let them be and they will realize their freedom, a kind of freedom that could be formulated by saying that it ends where the private property of the next person begins.

This is not at all an abstract kind of freedom, it is certainly material, and grossly so. Hence the effort of bourgeois ideology to spiritualize it, so that what only a few possess (a property to exercise their free choice) may be shared 'in spirit' by all. When a Marxist mentions the foregrounding of contradictions, he refers, amongst other things, to the bourgeois principle of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity', meaning that it shall be applied to all, not in fantasy but in reality.

The principle must be promoted, not only rhetorically, but effectively, materially. It is not a question of convincing the prisoner of his freedom on the basis that he is man, this is just the strategy of bourgeois rhetorics. Marxism tells him about the necessity of becoming aware of his real situation, a kind of consciousness which is not a mere intellectual reflection, but a scientific knowledge of the structure of reality that makes possible an action leading to liberation. Marxism is not, obviously, a guide to evade any situation leaving everything as it was before; on the contrary, it is a theory the ultimate aim of which is to transform society in order to create a more human world. This is the only path that leads to true liberty, not any transcendent spiritual ideal, but one limited by material conditions of life.

---

9.-Louis Althusser, 'Sobre el humanismo en las sociedades socialista y comunista', in *Polemica sobre el Humanismo* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1974).

This criticism of the bourgeois individual has important consequences for the notion of the writer and of its relation both to his work and his reader as we shall see in the next section.

#### 4) The Genius, the Author, the writer.

'Individuals make each other both physically and spiritually, but they do not make themselves.'

Marx, *German Ideology*.

The genius may be considered to be the quintessence of bourgeois ideology, the greatest expression of what the free independent individual is able to achieve independent of the given conditions of existence. The Romantic artist is in turn the greatest expression of the genius as Romantic aesthetics confirms. This is so because the genius embodies transcendence, the spirit beyond and above material existence. This transcendent being is, like divinity, endowed with a creative power out of which his work springs. As such he is in absolute control of his creature. This is the authority of the author<sup>10</sup>. Also, through his work, he exercises his authority on the reader whose highest aspiration is the ecstasy, to be transported beyond himself, that is, transcendence bestowed on his devotee by the powerful genius.

The work of art must itself become as transparent as possible to permit access to the worshipped author. In its purity the great work of art facilitates the encounter. The difficulties which threaten it always come from the impurity of the reader and the actual conditions which surround the act of reading. The task of traditional literary criticism is to clear the way, to free the reader from the muddle of reading, in short, to explain. Hence its power... and its weakness.

The Marxist attack falls on the transcendental condition of the genius, on the mystified figure as such. It does not deny the existence of extraordinary minds. What it refuses to accept is the existence of authors, powerful geniuses who create reality out of nothing. It pronounces the 'non serviam' to the authority of the author. If there is an example of a man in possession of a outstanding mind who has made the radical decision to give everything up for an ideal and has put, in a most precarious situation, the foundations of a new order, that man was Karl Marx. It is not a frustrated character the one who sets about this final attack on the myth of genius, but rather its very prototype. In this sense, Marxism has contributed decisively to the antimythological attitude of twentieth century thought, paradoxically installed in a age in which myths are continually produced one day to be destroyed the next.

---

10.-Alan Sinfield, 'Royal Shakespeare', in J. Dollimore and A. Sinfield (eds.) *Political Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1985) pp. 175ff.

What interest may capitalist society have in the figure of the genius? The genius is the sublimation of the individual and the greatest expression of the self-made man. But it is not so much a question, any longer, of proving that extraordinary individuals may freely do what they choose, regardless of socio-cultural conditions. Rather, what must be demonstrated is equality of opportunities. The highest levels of society must ideally be made accessible to non-extraordinary figures, 'worthy men' who rise mainly on the bases of their effort, and in this way constitute the evidence both of work as a central value and of the flexibility principle on which bourgeois society is founded. Therefore, though the myth of the genius is maintained, it must also undergo a metamorphosis so that it can be spread and embodied in society. An ideally beautiful metamorphosis; it looks ugly, though, when we realize that all those who in fact have not had an opportunity are implicitly classified as 'unworthy'.

But what is so important about the individual freedom that it should be worth such an investment of ideological and even economic effort? An interesting suggestion can be found in T. Hawkes quotation of Paul Rabinow on Foucault

'The power of the state to produce an increasingly totalizing web of control is intertwined with and dependent on its ability to produce an increasing specification of individuality'

All this shows the importance of the terminological substitution of Genius/ Author for writer. For Marxism, specifically, the writer produces meaning out of interpretation/appropriation of the meanings which constitute 'reality', in order either to spread and support dominant ideology or to challenge it. His practical work grows more valuable in a world increasingly dominated by the mass media and where the battle for their control is nowadays of prime importance since they are the characteristic postmodern producers of meaning. Hence these writers' efforts to reach beyond the academic circle, simply because their praxis demands it. Hence too the importance of rhetorics as a means of reaching those parts of society whose potentiality can be activated through awareness of their capacity to provoke the necessary social transformations.

##### 5) Rhetorics and reception: 'Ubi auditus non est non efundas sermonem'

'Your tale anoyeth al this compaignnye.  
Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye,  
For therinne is ther no sport ne game

...

For certainly, as that thise clerkes seyn,  
**Whereas a man may have non audience,**  
**Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence.**<sup>11</sup>

---

11.-Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Prologue of the Nonnes Preestes Tale', ll. 2789-91, 2800-2, in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The moral tale told by the monk deserves this serious rebuke by the host because it has broken the rule of the game the explicit aim of which, as stated in the General Introduction, was to amuse the group of pilgrims by telling a tale. This reprimand, though, is preceded by another which explains, at a different level, the reasons why this tale, regardless of its aesthetic value, cannot be enjoyed. On the one hand the Knight, understandably, will no longer listen to the Monk's record of the fall of the wealthy

"Hoo!" quod the knight, "good sire, namore of this!  
That ye han seyde is right ynough, ywis,  
And muchel more; for litel hevynesse  
Is right ynough to much folk, I guesse.  
I seye for me, it is great disease,  
Whereas men han been in a greet welthe and ese,  
To heren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!"<sup>12</sup>

But, curiously enough, it is also he, the representative of the old system, who passes the judgement that follows making use of the ideals of the new born bourgeois society, the flexibility of which makes it possible for the individual to rise from a low to a high position

'And the contrarie is joye and greet solas,  
As whan a man hath been in povre staat,  
And clymbeth up and vexeth fortunat,  
And there abideth in prosperitee.'<sup>13</sup>

The Knight's words are, therefore, an attempt at adapting to the new social system. They reflect the desire to make the medieval and the upcoming modern world compatible. When read from this perspective, the tale which follows, 'The Nonnes Preestes Tale', appears as an answer to The Knight. By underlining the radical change of values which is taking place, it undermines the Knight's dream of harmony. The feudal lord, Chauntecleer, who lives on the work of the poor widow saves his life when he realizes that it had been based on a hideous error -the medieval idea of the world- and recognizes the new central value, work. All this pleases the audience greatly as the host makes explicit at the end of the tale, in this way dramatizing the link between taste, as practical judge of aesthetic qualities, and the system of values<sup>14</sup>.

The silence kept by the knight and the joy shown by the host confirms that the work of art has been able to present what is in fact a critical moment as

---

12.-Ibidem, ll. 2767-2770.

13.-Ibidem, ll. 2774-2777.

14.-It could be argued that the widow is not bourgeois at all. This is a good example of the way ideology lays its foundations in what is considered to be universal. Work appears not as the new central value, but as the true reality that, though forgotten by nobility, has always been there.

something convenient; in other words, the tale has aestheticized the crisis in order to make it not only enduring but even desirable. The tale does not, therefore, offer the vision of any transcendental or extremely remote reality which man either cannot or will not dare to face, so acting as mediator between the human being and Truth, which is the function one of the classical formulas attributes to the work of art. Rather, opposed to medieval thought, which condemns change and spreads fear of it, the vision is of historical change the evidence of which is present in everyday life.

I mention this example because it belongs to a crucial historical moment when the crisis of the old values means also a revision of both the rhetorics and reception of the work of art. This is what recurs about six centuries later. Once the subjective principle (the genius) and the objective values (those formerly considered to be intrinsic to the work of art) are challenged, two ways are left to literary criticism: either it gives up all illusion of objectivity and gives in to the wild subjectivity of individual reading, or it tries to find new ways to overcome pure subjectivism.

Of the many attempts to answer this problem, three are of special relevance to us. The first, New Criticism, though explicitly trying to reject subjectivist reading through emphasis on close reading, ends up in subjectivism because it puts individual reading above everything else. Certain kinds of psychological studies, such as those undertaken by Norman Holland, push this to the extreme. They give up objective reading of the works of art for the objective analysis of subjective readings.

A second alternative lies in several forms of semiotic studies. In short, they are concerned, first, with the study of the laws that rule the generation of meaning, and then, with putting them into practice, that is, with generating meaning.

Finally, another possibility consists of seeking refuge from subjectivism in the community of readers. This is a way also chosen by other human sciences apart from literary studies. Its advantage is that the community provides a solid ground both for interpretation and aesthetic judgement. In so far as a society embodies shared values, they are no longer merely subjective.

Two extreme positions are discernible here. On the one hand, Stanley Fish, and on the other, the current we are dealing with. The idea of a secular community as the ultimate justification is Romantic in origin, but Romanticism, unlike Marxism, did not try to base its vision of reality on material conditions, nor, of course, on the dynamics of class struggle as the factor determining historical progress. Stanley Fish shares his negligence of material conditions with Romanticism, but in addition he is involved in twentieth century scepticism regarding the Romantic ideal of a unique community. The two world wars

destroyed for ever the faith in a historical progress leading to that goal, and left behind the fragmentation which presides over this century. This is why Fish does not try to root aesthetic judgements in a unique community, but sets about making them relative to the one that passes them.

Post-structuralist Marxism is also marked with the conscience of fragmentation which affects it in a specific way. The complexity of modern society together with the rise of difficulties of a new kind which hinder the historical realization of communism such as the cold war, and the establishment in democratic Europe of the so-called welfare state, forced the planning of new strategies. All this contributed to produce division within communism. Fragmentation has also affected the leader of the masses, the proletariat, no longer compact as it was in the nineteenth century. New leading forces have appeared gathered by the realization of their latent strength, such as Feminism, arising from the role of women in modern society, or the Ecologist movement, emerging in the context of the newly established relationship between man and nature.

Redefining strategies is also a necessity as regards Marxist literary criticism and its central concern, the relationship between the work of art and reality. What is the status of the work of art? Shall the act of reading be understood simply as a pastime? May interpretation become a way of saying/doing something or is it bound to be reduced to a mere intellectual activity emmured in academics? To these questions Marxism gives a clear answer in principle. The relationship between the work of art and reality must be put in terms of praxis. The work of art does not act immediately on the reader as an isolated individual, but as member of a system that appropriates it for its own production of meaning. Appropriation is the necessary mediation between work of art and history. Therefore the strategies of a socially engaged critical activity must be so directed as to reappropriate meaning, and in this sense, Marxism is in keeping with the second alternative I have mentioned above, semiotics.

I say reappropriate simply because the work of art has been appropriated by the dominant value system, but we should beware of associating reappropriation with a sort of Heideggerian recovery of an 'original' meaning. It is a practical activity aimed firstly at countering the conventional production of meaning in service of the dominant class, and secondly at exposing that meaning to show how what is presented as a system of natural eternal values is in fact historical and transitory, in short, that things are not what they are, but what they are historically made to be. Furthermore, it does not only prove the necessity of change inherent to historical reality, but the necessity of actively participating in its transformation. Last but not least, it acts to this end.

Marxist criticism is, of course, a scandal for the academy. The latter, and New Criticism above all, necessarily conceives of its function, after the ideals

of the enlightenment, as an explanation, an illumination, a rationalization of the work of art, that provides for the encounter, that perfect symbiosis of reader-work of art-writer, in a moment isolated from historical reality. 'Necessarily' because this conventional idea merely reflects the social justification the system assigns to the critics it pays for, thus defining their practical activity. The purpose of this kind of criticism is to spread culture, to make it accessible to a broader range of people. Literature thus becomes the privileged channel of the essences of culture, one through which they run pure. The underlying idea of language is that it is a means of communication which makes possible the reception of the same meanings originally emitted.

Marxism finds these ideals radically insufficient. More than this, as we have already noticed, it shows that this idea of language is not disinterested, that the essences of culture are a means of control, of spreading a convenient conception of reality, the principle of which is that things are what they are. If different readings are produced, this does not mean to liberal humanism that things are not just what they are, but that there are as many things enclosed in the mystery of the work as in the human heart, so that every individual may drink of this inextinguishable well of spiritual health<sup>15</sup>.

We could say that Marxism is a sort of socially engaged material semiotics which refuses to accept any mystification of the process of communication, and for which meaning is produced and appropriated for practical reasons. This very mechanism, which acts silently and implicitly in everyday life, is used by modern Marxist critics in a scandalously explicit way.

If we compare Marxism to another post-structuralist current which also shows that things are not what they are, deconstruction, we may see the Marxist position more clearly. For deconstruction undecidability is the central principle of interpretation. Marxism criticizes the absolutization that theory makes of this principle which in praxis is only one moment of the sign, the other being the link between signifier and signified established and fixed by a correlation of historical forces, and which can only be changed if the correlation changes. It is not the theoretical undecidability what moves history but the conflict between social forces trying to fix meaning for their own interests. Deconstruction is a very good tool in the hands of the Marxist critic because it helps to show that there is no naturally fixed signifier-signified relation<sup>16</sup>.

In so far as Shakespeare is concerned, the activity of this material semiotics will try to show, first, the ideological production of the myth of

---

15.-Alan Sinfield, Op.cit., p. 174.

16.-That Deconstruction should be used as a tool deeply offends its followers. This may explain why J. Hillins Miller in the introduction to his *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1987) gives a rather unethical reading of marxist criticism.

Shakespeare and the use it has been put to historically. So Terence Hawkes, for instance, in his *Shakespearean Rag* analyses the historical process through which Stratford upon Avon was made a sort of Mecca of culture. But he does this telling us, at the same time, the story of Shakespeare's birthplace as a strategy to counter the official 'history' which, reflected by Hawkes's mirror, is then turned into a story. This serves too as an example of a kind of poststructural criticism which, instead of trying to reproduce the work of art on the level of analysis, renounces this means of connection with the author. The critic himself becomes a writer who tells his own story<sup>17</sup>.

The first step to be taken by this kind of criticism is that of exposing the historical process of construction of the Myth of Shakespeare. So it shows, for instance, that liberal humanism, which has presided over the English education system throughout this century, had to produce new values in order to counter the impact on national identity produced by the contradictions in the concept of the empire and the pervading sense of desintegration at the beginning of the present century, and Shakespeare was the corner stone of the whole system. The second step is to investigate the possibilities of intervention in the system and to align with progressive social forces. The critic now becomes an aspect of the conscience of the social group, a voice that expresses its reinterpretation of tradition and builds an alternative to the official image, ultimately an alternative identity. Hence the importance of rhetorics<sup>18</sup>.

The conventional idea of Marxist criticism reduces it to some sort of extrinsic analysis of the work of art conceived as a mere reflection of external reality. This is a good example of appropriation by ideology: it tries both to simplify and to explain something very complex and difficult. By 'extrinsic analysis' one normally understands the application to the work of art of ideas which are foreign to the realm of art, and when Marxism is concerned, these ideas come from social analysis. It is assumed that there is an 'inside', where the essence of the work of art lies, and an 'outside', where the so called extrinsic studies remain excluded from the sacred being of art. But precisely what Marxism has shown is that the opposition 'outside'/'inside' is clearly ideological. Materialist semiotics does not study art as a plain reflection of 'external' reality, its goal is, rather, to study the general production of meaning, inseparable from historical development, a part of which are both the work of art and interpretation. This very attempt at appropriation of Marxism strengthens the thesis which links interpretation to the historical interests obeyed by the production of meaning, and not only to the intrinsic qualities of a text.

---

17.- A proposal for a criticism of this kind was made by G. Hartman in his *Criticism in the Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1980).

18.- Cfr. Terry Eagleton, 'Conclusion: Political Criticism', in *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

David Lehman offers a good example of the conventional idea of Marxist criticism

'This school prescribes the study of books not because of their moral valour or aesthetic value but because they permit the professor to advance a political, often Marxist agenda.'<sup>19</sup>

It is worth looking carefully into this statement which takes its rhetorical strength precisely from its brevity. First of all, we must notice that the paragraph quoted above belongs to an article dedicated to the recent discovery of Paul de Man's Nazi sympathies in the past. The mention of Marxism is, therefore, farfetched to say the least, and makes no sense unless as a means of extending the attack on theory that pervades the whole article. The rhetoric effect of this statement lies in the possibility of synthesizing a whole current of thought in passim through a tacit agreement with the reader. It implies the non uttered phrase 'as we all know' which makes any further commentary unnecessary.

Second, the reviewer clearly takes sides when he compares what the Marxist School does and what should be done. Marxism is indirectly defined as a sort of extrinsic analysis that as such has no access to the intrinsic values (notice 'valour' and 'value') of the work of art.

Third, Lehman does actually grasp the political intention of Marxist analysis. Such intention, foreign to art, should also be foreign to literary criticism which, so it is implied, should be apolitical. As a consequence, Marxism is accused of making use of the academy for aims which have nothing to do with it.

One of the aims, though, of Marxist literary criticism and theory, as we have already observed, is to show that the apolitical criticism Lehman proposes and is perhaps trying to represent, simply does not exist. In the words of Terry Eagleton

'There is, in fact, no need to drag politics into literary theory: as with South African sport, it has been there from the beginning. I mean by the political no more than the way we organize our social life together, and the power-relations which this involves; and what I have tried to show throughout this book is that the history of modern literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch.'<sup>20</sup>

---

19.-David Lehman, 'Deconstructing De Man's Life', in *Newsweek*, Feb. 15 (1988), p. 54.

20.-T. Eagleton, *Op. cit.*, p. 194.

On the other hand, the use of the academy for aims foreign to it is actually intentional on the part of Marxist critics. But they are not so naive as to fall in the temptation of believing that the academy does not have enough devices, that it is not itself a device of the system to control their activities. In fact with the admission of Marxist studies the academy fulfils its ideal of plurality. We could say this is a risk the academy has to run to be itself. In this way it succeeds in making of Marxism another commodity among the many it can offer the consumer.

The Marxist critic is perfectly aware that he lives in a state of permanent tension with the integrating power of the system. More than this, he will not be able to avoid being absorbed if he remains comfortably installed in the sphere of the academy. As we have already said, it is in the nature of Marxist praxis to take root in social forces. A discourse just limited to the University may have some individual effects, but for this very reason it can be perfectly controlled under current conditions. The academy admits Marxism because it is a controlled risk, and Marxism uses the academy because, after all, it constitutes a risk waiting for the normal conditions to change so that it may escape control. But it does not remain there thinking society may be changed from on high, on the contrary, it tries to reach beyond the boundaries of the University, and gain access to the social forces which may provoke the change of the current conditions.

This may explain why, from outside the academy, in an article in *Newsweek*, it has been found necessary to contribute to the appropriation of Marxism, reflecting once again the image of the conventional definition allegedly assumed by the readers.

# Recent Critical Approaches to Shakespeare's Tragic Plays

Terence Hawkes. Cardiff University.

- 1) Lear        'Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.  
                 Give me the map there. Know that we have divided  
                 In three our kingdom...'

(I.i.38-41)

The Old Vic production, directed by Granville-Barker, starring John Gielgud.  
April 15 to May 25, 1940.

==Difference between==

- a) The Granville-Barker (i.e. Bradley) approach:

Granville-Barker's innovations were stratagems designed to generate a more intense degree of psychological realism; to make the plays seem more cohesive, more plausible, their structure more ingeniously congruent with what he took to be their purpose, the exploration of transcendental, somehow 'universal' human character in action. His influential *Prefaces* to Shakespeare had extended and reinforced the focus upon universality, upon matters which, in terms of the specification of individual 'character', transcend immediate pressures of history, economics, politics as part of their commitment to the notion that 'live' performance crucially determines meaning. The declared aim to discover what Shakespeare's plays 'essentially are' together with the tenet that they 'should be performed as Shakespeare wrote them' constitute recipes for a kind of confident essentialism that mocks at the term 'modern'. It smacks more obviously of Matthew Arnold's conclusion that the function of the critic is 'to see the object as in itself it really is'.

A good example occurs at the point in Act I where Lear proceeds to announce his 'darker purpose' -the division of the kingdom- and orders 'Give me the map there'.

Granville Barker's concern at this moment seems to have been entirely with Lear's character. As one report puts it, the performance reaches 'a clearer

definition of character... unblurred by emotion... We have a distinct impression of an old man who is yet alert and masterful...' In the famous *Preface to King Lear*, Granville-Barker had already argued that Shakespeare presents Lear's might and genius in the early scenes not in any great series of actions, but 'in every trivial thing that he is'. Christine Dymkowski comments 'The production achieved this effect in a number of ways. For example, when Lear demands "Give me the map there", Gielgud "without looking... half extend(ed) his hands towards the chamberlain at his side"; such a small gesture helped to convey Lear's certainty of his power.'

==...And==

b) We might, however, set psychological 'insights' of this order against what we know would have been supplied for this moment by the context of Shakespeare's Own Time:

The emblematic force of the line. The words 'Give me the map there', and the consequent unfurling of a reductive programme of brutal partition, pitch Shakespeare's contemporaries into the middle of a complex discursive arena in which the spectre of political disintegration confronts and interrogates Jame's efforts to present the Throne as the source and guarantee of social coherence. At this level the material impact of the actual map - a whole culture shockingly reduced to and treated as a diagram - far outstrips in its political implications any petty revelation of 'character' that may be given by the manner in which it is siezed.

2) So we can broaden this to distinction in approaches to Lear to one between

a) Psychological realism in the service of an apparently 'timeless' human nature in which Lear's 'character' doesn't change over 400 years (a view deriving from Bradley)

==set against==

b) What might be termed an approach which acknowledges at least the existence and something of the pressures of history.

3) I wish to concentrate attention of the latter, in the name of modernity, because if the 19th Century's concern in criticism was with 'character', it is becoming that the major concern of the 20th. Century is with **History**. So: what precisely do we mean by a 'Historical' approach in 20th. Century? Let's consider

a) Simple 'Historicism': i.e. Shakespeare's plays set against historical background: (a view deriving from Tiliard).

This sort of historicism, still current, still 'recent' on both sides of the

Atlantic, aims to focus on 'background' material against which literary texts can be placed and then read. However, a series of assumptions threaten its purpose. Chief amongst them is a notion of the literary text as a privileged vehicle of communication, functioning most fruitfully when placed against its 'background', but in the end finally independent of it. The central difficulty lies in the distinction between text and context, foreground and background, smuggled in here as a major presupposition first of our own literacy and second of a view of history warped by its commitment to the academic study of literature and in consequence seeing literature as the major manifestation and embodiment of a society's ideology and way of life.

b) In recent years, American 'New Historicism' has offered a radical challenge to Historicism of this sort:

One of the main concerns of the 'New Historicism' currently sweeping all before it in the English departments of North America, is to renegotiate that distinction between foreground and background: to relocate and then re-read literary texts in a quite different relation to the other material signifying practices of a culture. On the one hand this constitutes a reaction to a de-historicized idealism which sees an apparently free-floating autonomous body of writing called 'literature' as the repository of universal values of concern to a supposedly permanent 'human nature'. On the other it constitutes a rejection of the presuppositions of a 'history of ideas' which sees literature as a static 'mirror' of its time rather than as a constituent active element alive to and involved in the multiple production of meaning within it. Fundamentally, the 'new' historicism attempts to dissolve the modern notion of 'literature' altogether and to merge its texts back into the historical milieu from which 'English' has irresponsibly prised them. It sees many other cultural institutions, family, marriage, religion and the State as being equally determining factors in respect of the individual human being who becomes the ideological product of the relations of power which operate between those institutions in particular societies. I am thinking here of the work of Stephen Greenblatt (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*), Jonathan Goldberg (*James I and the Politics of Literature*) and Louis Adrian Montrose.

The 'New Historicism' project owes something to Foucault and in this sense, as for example Leonard Tennenhouse puts it in his provocative *Power on Display: the politics of Shakespeare's genres*, it calls for a major 'unthinking' of our appropriating procedures, particularly those by which we 'enclose' Renaissance culture within our own discourse and thus make it speak our notion of sexuality, the family, and the individual.'

For the 'New Historicism', the texts of the plays can only function as part of a quite different discursive order whose contours, boundaries and dispositions of experience are hardly likely to match those we take for granted.

For instance, as Tennenhouse persuasively argues, Shakespeare's plays spring from and engage with a world in which literary and political discourse have yet to be differentiated. Like other texts of the time (the distinctions between them often invented by ourselves), the plays participate in their society in terms of a capacity to make sense in and of it. They thus take their place in a symbolic field which includes royal proclamations, parliamentary debates, letters and travellers' reports as aspects of a number of different rhetorical strategies available for the production of meaning and deployed within 'Renaissance debates concerning the nature and origins of political power.' Within that symbolic field, 'New Historicism' has nevertheless characteristically paid particular attention to the interaction between State power and cultural (often literary) forms.

For instance, the question of Elizabeth's potential marriage and the complications of the descent of political power through the female line generated numerous debates, attempting to work out solutions to political problems in sexual terms. For Tennenhouse, Shakespeare's romantic comedies contribute to the colloquy. We can take them as political writings to the extent that 'to write about erotic desire or courtship and marriage in Elizabethan England was to take up a political argument'. It is after all our sentimentality, not that of the Elizabethans, which seeks to obscure the political nature of sexual relations.

In a society whose purchase on the world remained fundamentally oral rather than literate, power worked through display and spectacle rather than the written word, with the result that the stage, no less than the scaffold, became a place where it sought to manifest its lineaments and disseminate its influence. Dramatic genres accordingly become politicized to a considerable degree, particularly those encouraging a focus on the Queen's own 'aristocratic body' as one of a number of stratagems for the authorization of the monarchy.

But where the romantic comedies and chronicle history plays equate Elizabeth's body and the State, Hamlet signals the moment when that equation becomes problematical, as the physical decay of Elizabeth's body becomes a matter of national concern. Jacobean tragedy, says Tennenhouse and others, then develops a genre capable of offering strategies for the display of power in a different mode; that of a patriarchy in which the King functions as the nation's husband or father - the role of *parens patriae* involving a sexuality inappropriate to the concept of Virgin Queen.

## -MACBETH

King James, Queen and Prince of Wales visit Oxford, August 1605; met by a pageant by Matthew Gwinne. At the gate of St. John's College, 3 youths 'attired like nymphs' appeared before the royal party:

1st Sybil: 'Hail, thou who rulest Scotland!'

2nd Sybil: 'Hail, thou who rulest England!'

3rd Sybil: 'Hail, thou who rulest Ireland!'

-LEAR and tearing up of map into Wales, Scotland, England:

**-Both responses to the Gunpowder Plot. (5th Nov. 1605)-**

Nevertheless, the New Historicist case has a tendency to force plays to speak to a single, albeit complex, brief and fruitful contradiction which becomes the first casualty in the process. Rather too frequently the text seems smoothly conducive to what the creature 'Shakespeare' thinks and believes, with small allowance made for its cross-grained recalcitrance, its equivocation, its refusal to say one thing and one thing only. New Historicism is non-Marxist, or refuses Marxist dialectic, to the extent that it presents the political state it engages with as inevitable, unchanging, static, drained of a potential for radical resistance or at best sleekly recuperative of the dissent which we know lay in wait.

4) However, to turn from America to Britain, now: 'Cultural Materialism'.

a) It derives from the sharper political climate of Britain and the committedly Marxist analyses of Raymond Williams, which see culture as **material** practice: i.e., not transcending material economic and political considerations, but as the whole fabric of what people actually get up to in concrete terms in the concrete world. Like New Historicism, Cultural Materialism is interested in every manifestation of culture and does not privilege literature, or accord writing any 'transcendent' dimension or quality. It places literature firmly in the context of the general social process, and thus on a par with the activities of subordinate or marginalized groups, and it takes 'high culture' as just **one** set of signifying practices amongst others, studying the implications of literary texts in history. In respect of literary texts, to use the words of Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, it works with a 'sense of texts as inseparable from their conditions of production and reception in history, and as involved, necessarily, in the making of cultural meanings which are always, finally, political meanings'. No doubt the papers of Dollimore, Sinfield and John Drakakis will exemplify that principle in their own way. Each of them would agree that unlike New Historicism, Cultural Materialism doesn't pretend to be politically neutral. It commits itself to 'the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class.'"

---

1.-*Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds. J. Dollimore and A. Sinfield (Manchester U.P., 1985).

Committed to contemporary post-structuralist theories of the subject, of the sign and of ideology, Cultural Materialism uses these to focus on those features of the Bard's material existence amongst us that between them unravel any claims for the transcendental integrity of his plays. The promise held out by this approach is a finally transformed Shakespeare whose textual **heterogeneity** will inevitably project the plays beyond the reach of a criticism that is shackled to the state of the anaesthetic, mimetic sign and its single or unitary once-for-all meaning.

As a single example, where Ulysses's speech on 'degree' from *Troilus and Cressida*

The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre,  
Observe degree, priority and place,  
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form  
Office and custom, in all line of order.

.....  
Take but degree away, Untune that string  
And hark what discord follows!

was central to Tillyard's recuperative kind of analysis which aimed to make the plays expressions of a comfortably ordered 'world picture' (itself originating as a bulwark against the ideological chaos of the second World War), then a reconstituted materialist criticism must focus upon the discursive issues raised in a different speech from the same play in which Troilus refers to a 'madness of discourse' which generates the paradox 'this is, and is not, Cressid' (V, ii, 140-44).

Here in a moment of intense self-reflection, the very material conditions of its representation as theatrical illusion weave themselves into the 'doubleness' of the play's language through an unsettling alienating gesture made in that last line to the male actor who here plays the female role. At such moments duplicity expands from being a moral matter discussed by the play to become the means whereby drama's own inherently duplicitous nature as art is suddenly and (in mimetic terms) shatteringly revealed. I won't attempt to speak further of the ways in which this project deals with Shakespeare's plays in terms of their own time, as no doubt the forthcoming papers of Dollimore, Sinfield and Drakakis will concern themselves with that. I do want to focus attention on what seems to me to be one of the central issues that concerns the activity of Cultural Materialism at the present time.

I refer of course to those 'cultural meanings' that we generate **now**, in our own historical context which can hardly be separated from our perception of those generated **then**, in the text's historical context. At its furthest reach, Cultural Materialism must be conceived as -and would certainly conceive itself as- the criticism of post-imperial recession.

As such, Cultural Materialism is able to focus on the inevitably productive nature and political function of all Shakespearean criticism which, whilst proclaiming its objectivity and its access to the 'essential' Shakespeare, ends by processing the plays in the image of its own presuppositions and for the purposes of its own cultural imperialism.

This overt concern with the material historical, economic and social implications of literary criticism, this focus on the political relation between the academic pursuit institutionalized as 'English' and the cultural politics of Englishness, is perhaps what finally differentiates British 'Cultural Materialist' approaches to Shakespeare from their American 'New Historicist' counterpart. Where Tennenhouse undoubtedly nods towards the involvement of his own writing in a particular social order, the British critic Malcom Evans, for instance, makes that sort of complicity a central concern of his book *Signifying Nothing*.

For the British, after all, 'English' never was and never could be just another subject. Evans writes, of course, as a Welshman, not an Englishman. And in British Wales a supposedly universal English culture can often be seen to have belittling limits by those who inhabit, and sometimes feel its edge. But, as recent uprisings amongst newer non-English communities in Britain have shown, the voice of the periphery, the so called brutes, what Shakespeare's play nominates in Caliban (or, as Evans interestingly suggests what others nominated in the voices of such as Gerrard Winstanley, Abiezer Coppe, Ranters, Levellers, Diggers), has a habit of thrusting itself to the centre of the stage, of breaking free from the occlusion imposed by our particularly narrow version of 'Englishness'.

To a literary criticism which responds to these 'alienated' tones (and two of us critics, myself and John Drakakis appear before you as denizens of the despised and brutish periphery: neither of us lives in England) these voices speak, of course, not of Shakespeare's plays as in themselves they really are, but in social and political terms, of the uses to which they have been and may be put: of the Bard as cultural signifier, an agency of cultural meaning, of his plays as political weapons, of 'English' as an ideological stratagem, and of education as the most insidious form of colonization.

In this sense, this kind of Cultural Materialism will be able to see a Shakespearean play not, as did Tillyard, as embodying commonly held views which spring from 'the collective mind of the people', but as an arena or battleground or site of struggle, in which different views, different 'readings', undertaken from different political positions compete for the power to generate cultural meaning, i.e. for political power, and it will see them having this role now, in the Twentieth Century, as much as then.

**Texts, plays, then and now, have no essential meanings, we make them mean, we mean by them.**

For instance, in the name of say 'Feminism' we can read Macbeth in a way which focuses on Lady Macbeth's

'.....Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full  
Of direct cruelty!  
-----  
.....Come to my woman's breasts  
And take my milk for gall...'  
(I, v, 41ff.)

--and of course the witches, King James etc.

It follows that Cultural Materialism will be concerned with how, since the industrial revolution, we have generated the monster 'Shakespeare', with inverted commas, (a sobriquet for 'Culture' itself, but in fact the construction of a **specific historical moment**, latterly shaped to meet the needs of a professionalized literary criticism) --and within the institution of **English** working to establish and reinforce that paradoxical sense of 'universal' individuality which, as Foucault argues, is part and parcel of a grand design. As Paul Rabinon puts it, speaking on Foucault's behalf:

'The power of the state to produce an increasingly totalizing web of control is intertwined with and dependent on its ability to produce an increasing specification of individuality'<sup>2</sup>

5) If we now return to the moment of that 1940 production -of Lear's 'Give me the map, there'- we must confront the significance of the **audience that did not respond** (like Sherlock Holmes's dog that did not bark).

**Review: Punch** May 15, 1940: raises issue of play taking place against a background of War, but tries to joke about it: would Lear, walking into a lamppost in the blackout, launch into a 'denunciation of the Squire of Berchtesgarden' etc...

**APRIL 15TH, ALLIED TROOPS LAND IN NORWAY**  
**MAY 10TH, GERMANS INVADE HOLLAND, BELGIUM AND LUXEMBOURG**  
**MAY 10TH, CHAMBERLAIN RESIGNS, CHURCHILL TAKES OVER**

Speaking of the production, Gielgud said:

'...It seemed to take our minds off the awful things that were happening in France. When people used to come

---

2.- Paul Rabinon, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 22.

round I would say "How can you stand seeing so agonizing a play when such a terrible things are going on in the world?" and they would answer that it gave them a kind of courage... the glory of the play and its magnificent poetry took you out of yourself. Shakespeare has always had that extraordinary appeal for every king of audience...'

'Shakespeare' and 'English' operate to generate & reinforce individualism. During the run of this production at the Old Vic, from April 15th to May 25th 1940, a threat to the integrity of the kingdom was a daily experience of its war-time audience. These weeks saw Chamberlain deposed, Churchill installed, and the famous promise of nothing but blood, toil, tears and sweat. Perhaps most important of all, they saw the passing of the ***Emergency Powers Bill***, **Wednesday May 22nd 1940**.

This gave Government full power 'to control all persons and property'. Banks and finance came directly under Government control. At the same time a *Treachery Bill* established the death penalty for subversive activities.

*Atlee Broadcast* (May 22): 'Today, **on your behalf**, Parliament has given the Government full power to control all persons and property ...the services and property of all must be at the disposal of the government for the common task... the Government now has the right to call upon any citizen to do the work that is most immediately required in the national interest.'

Granville-Barker's over-busy concern with Lear's personality deflects rather than engages with the larger issues at work both in Shakespeare's time and in ours which invite an audience to produce meaning from the play rather than passively ingest it. The apparent absence of a response by the audience is, of course, a highly significant response in its own right: one echoed in the response of Tillyard himself to this context; for it is exactly then that he was preparing himself to write *The Elizabethan World Picture*, published 1943!

Granville-Barker was of course by now a figure of tragic Shakespearean proportions. One biographer (C.B. Purdon) sees him as 'a hero who gave up the struggle, threw off the dust of battle and became a mere professor'. The year 1916 was the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death and yet the National Theatre was further away than at any other time in Granville-Barker's life.

Instead, *Chuchin Chow* opened in August 1916 and ran for 5 years. Granville-Barker speaks (in *Exemplary Theatre*, 1922) of the 'bitterness of my realization... of the theatre's utter and ignominious failure during the war to lift its head into any region of fine feeling and eloquence.' In 1918 he married Helen Huntingdon and abandoned his theatrical kingdom. He then took to his study

(his wife felt that writing was more genteel a pursuit than the theatre) and prepared the way for an audience concerned only with a particular 'specification of individuality' by the writing of his immensely influential *Prefaces to Shakespeare* which, as we have seen, focus centrally on the construction of that sense of individuality. By 1940 he was living in Paris. His wife kept sending him messages of the German approach during the rehearsals for *Lear*. Lear-like, the man who had abandoned his theatrical kingdom sought to retain a foothold in it. Perhaps he had ever but slenderly known himself. The winds blew and cracked their cheeks. **Paris fell in June.**



# The Case for a Political/Cultural Analysis of Shakespeare: The Instances of Displacement and Perversion.

Jonathan Dollimore. Sussex University.

My paper focuses on two passages frequently cited in recent criticism for the obviously political issues which they raise. In the case of the first, from *The Tempest*, these issues include racism and colonialism. In the case of the second, from *Othello*, we again encounter racism and colonialism, now in a complex relationship with misogyny and xenophobia. The presence and influence of these phenomena in the early modern period generally, and in the plays of Shakespeare in particular, has been the subject of important recent work. On racism and colonialism, for example, I have in mind the pioneering work of George Lamming, and more recently, that of Peter Hulme, Paul Brown and Martin Orkin<sup>1</sup>. Lamming was writing in 1960 as a Caribbean immigrant to the UK. On the connections of racism with xenophobia there is the work of Richard Marienstras in France and Terence Hawkes in the UK<sup>2</sup>; on those between racism and misogyny that of Ania Loomba writing from India. The work of these and other scholars is sufficiently advanced for someone to attempt an ambitious synthesis - to attempt, for example, an analysis of the part played by such phenomena in the formation of the modern state, with the drama of this period being one important focus for such a study. This would indeed be an important project for that mode of criticism which has come to be called cultural materialism.

The analysis I want to offer today, though no less indebted to the work just mentioned, involves a different enterprise, one which moves inwards rather than outwards, concentrating on the violent complexity of these phenomena as they figure in social process and as dramatic representation.

(Although without the time to elaborate this point, I suspect that drama

---

1.-Paul Brown, 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge Mine', in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds. J. Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester U.P., 1985).

-Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters* (London: Methuen, 1986)

-George Lamming, *The pleasures of Exile* (London and New York, 1984).

-Martin Orkin, *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* (Craighall: Ad. Donker, 1987).

2.-Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespearean Rag: Essays on a Critical Process* (London: Methuen, 1986).

-Richard Marienstras, *New Perspectives on Shakespearean World* (Cambridge U.P., 1985).

is a genre with unique potential for representing the cultural dynamics which make up this complexity)<sup>3</sup>

In *The Tempest* Act I, scene ii, Caliban is summoned only in order to be denounced and to have his enslavement justified by Miranda in the speech before you

'Abhorred slave,  
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,  
Being capable of all ill! **I pitied thee,  
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour  
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,  
Know thine own meaning, I endow'd thy purposes  
With words that made them known.** But thy vile race,  
Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good natures  
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou  
Deservedly confin'd into this rock,  
Who hadst deserv'd more than a prison.'

Caliban replies with a memorable counter-accusation: 'You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse.'

A colonialist view of the play, taking its cue from Prospero and Miranda, might reason that Caliban uses their language to curse because his is a nature not only incapable of nurture but, worse still, a nature that perverts nurture; a nature that turns civilised language against itself, even attempting to rape the woman who taught it to him.

An anti-colonialist viewpoint might argue just the reverse: Caliban curses because he has been perverted by the corrupt language of an alien, invading culture.

But let's consider a third interpretation, which I shall call the post-structuralist. On this view Caliban curses because he has been produced as such a being within and by the language he uses; he curses not because language is the transparent medium which allows him to express, and us to see, his essentially perverted nature; nor because a corrupted language perverts his essentially good nature; but, rather, because he has no essential nature, perverted or true, only an identity to be formed in language.

Now I do concede that this may sound a little too postmodern, but consider the emphasised lines in Miranda's speech.

---

3.-Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race and Renaissance Drama* (Manchester U.P., 1989).

Miranda, herself constituted by the language she speaks - consider how this speech alone demonstrates how completely she has imbibed the colonialist perspective on the Island - does not necessarily know its effects. But maybe Prospero does. Old fashioned as I am when it comes to character analysis, I like to think so, if only because of the irony it lends to his final repossession of Caliban: 'This thing of darkness / I Acknowledge mine', an irony at once poignant and chilling.

Consider how effectively, in Miranda's narrative, an unnatural identity sanctions enslavement. Though he could learn, says Miranda, Caliban's nature would not take 'any print of goodness', and his 'vile race' had that in it which good natures could not abide to be with. Therefore this slave was 'Deservedly confined into this rock'. In passing we cannot but note the slippage here from individual to race (Kermode glosses race as 'hereditary nature appertaining to the species') especially since it is Caliban's unnatural birth and 'vile race' which, because unredeemable and in absolute contrast to 'good natures', justifiably condemn him to subjection; not the master's need for a slave - though this is of course Caliban's own explanation.

But even without Caliban's testimony we already have evidence enough from Prospero's account of his deposition to doubt the colonialist's appeal to nature. We learn from it that civilised natures have also been 'unnaturally' disruptive.

This is hardly new. It is in fact a critical commonplace. But Prospero's account of civilized disruption also suggests something else, less obvious and rather revealing: it is that there is an inconsistency if not a contradiction in the appeal to nature; he, Prospero, becomes preoccupied with study and it is just this activity - in one sense an obviously civilized pursuit - which awakens in his brother, Antonio, a culturally destructive and immoral (ie. unnatural) ambition:

'my trust,  
Like a good parent, did beget of him  
A falsehood in its contrary as great  
As my trust was'

Initially Antonio is described as parasitic upon Prospero's virtuous nature - 'The ivy which had hid my princely trunk / And sucked my verdure out on't' - but this isn't really adequate to the paradox, and Prospero goes on to describe his own investment in civilisation as awakening 'in my false brother / ...an evil nature'. So trust has begotten falsehood and the good natured the evil natured. Miranda renaturalises the paradox ('Good wombs have born bad sons'), but of course the play perpetuates it: the civilising process not only fails to subdue disorder but actually produces it: in addition to Antonio's earlier usurpation of Prospero's power, there is Antonio's and Sebastian's attempt on Alonso's life,

and Stephano's and Trinculo's attempt, aided by Caliban, to get the Island from Prospero (who himself got it from Caliban).

Now any good deconstructionist would follow me this far. But a materialist analysis is only just beginning. Of course, in developing it, I shall go too far; it is in the nature of political criticism to do just that. As justification - or at least explanation - I'm tempted to invoke Lamming's defence of his own political reading of *The Tempest* 27 years ago. He said then: 'It will not help to say I am wrong... for I shall reply that my mistake, lived and deeply felt by millions, proves the positive value of error.'

Political analysis really begins with this question: why, given that civilization endlessly produces its own disruption, is it the savage Caliban whose attempted rape makes him unredeemable, proof that his nature is incapable of nurture. Without at all wanting to minimise the hatefulness of attempted rape, one wonders by what criteria it is made the unredeemable crime of the savage, as if it were not primarily the recurrent crime of the civilized, especially in the role of coloniser. The Jacobeans could not foresee the sexually violent history of colonisation, but to know that rape is most often the crime of the dominant, of the master, they hardly needed to.

So perhaps the perverse, unredeemable nature created for Caliban within language is shown to be more than a strategy for justifying his enslavement along lines I've just suggested under the post-structuralist interpretation; perhaps we can also see it as a displacement of disorder from within the dominant onto the subordinate, achieved via a mapping of the natural/unnatural binary onto the dominant/subordinate hierarchy.

In the Renaissance, nature, especially in the form of natural law, legitimated hierarchy within family, class and state. And then across all three of these in terms of gender relations.

Within literary criticism of the Renaissance, that formulation of nature has sometimes been endorsed, more often nostalgically rehearsed. In contrast, I want to argue that we can find in Shakespeare an interrogation of the legitimating power of the natural/unnatural binary, a representation also of its violent breakdown, as well as its equally violent success; of the struggles to demystify it as well as those to reconstitute it. I find in the theatre of this period not so much a vision of political freedom as a knowledge of political domination. At the same time such knowledge was and remains indispensable to any struggle for freedom: it is a changeling knowledge. It is also a knowledge which 'successful' government cannot afford to acknowledge. The issues matter. I try to speak plainly.

One effect of an ideological concept like nature is that it contains contradiction; contains in both of two senses: incorporation and control. The process of incorporation is frequently the precondition for the process of control. But incorporation is also what renders control potentially precarious: enforced inclusion contains the ever present possibility of violent irruption.

In *King Lear* for example contradictory notions of nature eventually threaten the coherence of the concept itself; it splits apart, disintegrates ideologically, actually succumbing to the very contradictions it was supposed to contain (and thereby efface).

By contrast, in the passage from *Othello* which I discuss in a moment, we see nature ideologically strained to the point of breaking but still holding. Just. It's at this point that it may be at once barely coherent and most brutally repressive: as in *The Tempest*, the unnatural is discursively created, demonised and made the vehicle of displacement.

One of several reasons why binaries become unstable is because individuals or groups whose authority is ideologically sanctioned by the dominant term, fight among themselves. As in *The Tempest*, in so doing they tend to reproduce the binary internally: that which distinguished them from others (for example from the inferior, the ruled - necessarily ruled because inferior) is now used to distinguish them from each other in the struggle for ascendancy - which usually entails a struggle for legitimacy.

Let me briefly elaborate the point with reference to *Measure for Measure*. That play is about a crisis of authority. Things are sufficiently unstable for the Duke temporarily to abdicate. Before he leaves he sanctions a policy of authoritarian repression. Low life prostitution and lechery are identified as the causes of crisis yet we learn increasingly of a corruption more political than sexual. The Duke himself describes it in terms of insurrection, the world turned upside down and hierarchy itself as under threat; Escalus fears dissident factions within the state; low life characters point out that the actual sources of disorder are within the law itself, or practices sanctioned by law. Elbow's confusion of terms alerts us to the fact that maybe the respected should be suspected. Arguably then, the play shows corruption to be less the effect of anarchic desire than of the power structure seeking to recontrol it, and this policing of sexuality is surely both a re-legitimation of the state and the downward displacement of a more fundamental political instability within the state (the two things being inseparable).

The process is neatly focussed in the fact that the desire which Angelo seeks to police erupts within himself. And this is not just desire which seeks to escape the law, but desire rooted in a wish to pervert the law of the good - Angelo says, he desires Isabella 'fouly for those things that make her good' (II.ii); he

desires to 'raze the sanctuary'. Perversion rather than disorder is the crucial category here. We can see why from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). It is not Burton's discussion of what sexologists would later call the sexual perversions that produces the paradoxical sense of the word that interests me; it is Burton's discussion of what might be thought to be their opposite. Quite near the beginning of the *Anatomy* he declares that it is not our bestial qualities that are potentially the most dangerous, but our civilised ones: 'Reason, art (and) judgement, properly employed, much avails us, but if otherwise perverted, they ruin and confound us' (1.136).

Two points about the contemporary perception of this phenomenon. First, despite all the propaganda about hierarchy to the contrary, it was quite possible for people to see that disorder was often generated from the top down rather than from the bottom up. Indeed, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* dramatises just this perception while Machiavelli theorises it in the *Discourses*. Secondly, the related but more general belief that civilised behaviour could paradoxically be more pernicious than that of the primitive or low-life was traditional enough, even a commonplace. Montaigne offers a famous and challenging version of this argument in his essay on cannibals.

From the drama other instances come to mind. Consider that kind/unkind opposition: the unkind is the perversion of kind, yet just as obviously it springs from kind. And the accusation of unkindness is often a terrified disavowal of just that fact. There is hardly a play of this period through which that charge does not echo. And what after all is the source of conflict in the English history which Shakespeare so memorably dramatises but a massive, internicine struggle between kind: not just members of the same state and class, but of the very same family. (And let's recall that these are the three areas - state, class, family - which nature is supposed to ideologically underwrite).

In summary: deviation and the perverse are what the dominant defines itself against, yet repeatedly deviation and the perverse emerge from within - are produced by - the dominant. This is indeed both a problem for the dominant and for the deviant - for the first because authority is destabilised, for the second because the dominant's attempted relegitimation through displacement involves their persecution.

I would stress that all this can be inferred from the pre-Freudian meanings of perversion. Especially revealing are the OED entries which display that revealing slippage from divergence to evil: 'turned away from the right way or from what is right or good; perverted, wicked'.

Perversion is a concept originated in the idea of

1.- erring or straying or being diverted from

- 2.- a path, destiny or objective which is
- 3.- understood as natural or right - usually right because natural possibly having a yet higher legitimation in divine law).

In its original senses then, perversion is very closely related to deviation.

### **Nature and perversion.-**

Both concepts, perversion and deviation, are regulated by the binary opposition between the natural and the unnatural. This binary is what makes them conceivable. Consider Francis Bacon writing in 1622: 'Women to govern men... slaves freemen... being total violations and perversions of the law of nature and nations.'

Binary opposites, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out and Bacon here confirms, are violent hierarchies. Note how, in that Bacon passage, the violence of the hierarchy is already displaced, through the concept of violation, onto its subordinate terms, slaves and women. Perversion has indeed possessed the power to destabilize the very binary which creates it, but before we rush to create a politics of the perverse we should never forget the cost: death, mutilation and incarceration have been, and remain, the fate of those who are deemed to have perverted nature.

Perversion involves an erring or deviation from 'the straight and true'. Recall that Othello is described as the erring Barbarian; the 'extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere'. And Desdemona, in desiring Othello, has, according to her father, erred against nature. Over and again Elizabethan culture speaks the fear of perversion and deviation as disordered and disordering movement: from planetary irregularity to social mobility, from the vagrant and masterless man roaming the city, to the womb which supposedly wandered the body of the 'hysterical' woman.

The charge of perversity and deviation was at once a demonizing and a disavowal of disordering movement, and time and again metaphysical fixity - fixed origin, nature, identity, development and destiny - is invoked in its condemnation and curtailment.

In the numerous OED citations for the word and its cognate terms, two kinds of pervert recur, the wayward woman - whom we've already encountered in that quote from Bacon - and the religious heretic. At the beginning of Christian history they went together. As Milton put it, justifying the ways of God to man, Satan created a perverted kingdom and Eve was his first convert. Or rather I should say his first pervert. I am being quite precise here: in theological discourse the term to describe the opposite of conversion is, in fact, perversion,

and it signifies that terrible, unforgivable move from the true religion to the false. It is this use which suggests a central paradox of the perverse and another reason why it is so despised and feared. It is that perversion has its origins in, or exists in an intimate relation with, that which it subverts. In one sense this is the case by definition: to err or stray from the true or the right literally presupposes that one was once in the right place. But it goes deeper than that: the shattering effect of perversion is somehow related to the fact that it originates internally to just those things it threatens. Throughout the Renaissance (and western culture more generally) the paradox recurs: the most extreme threat to the true form of something comes not so much from its opposite or its direct negation, but in the form of its perversion; somehow the perverse is inextricably rooted in the true and the authentic, while being, in spite of (or rather because of) that connection, also the utter contradiction of the true and authentic. Perhaps this explains why perversion is so often perceived as at once utterly alien and yet mysteriously inherent. (It may also be because perversion implies appropriation: a turning from which is also a taking with; cfr. one OED entry: 'diversion to an improper use').

This is related to a second and equally disturbing paradox of the perverse, this time one which is inscribed in human nature and which suggests that we are created desiring that which is forbidden us. That this is so is not a contingent fact but an intrinsic aspect of our being. As John Norris puts it in 1687: 'What strange perversity is this of Man! When 'twas a Crime to taste th' enlightening Tree He could not then his hand refrain'. But long before this Augustine had offered a view of sin and death (the punishment for sin) as inherent within human nature, and paradoxically bound up with perversion and transgression. With the fall, the flesh began to contend against the spirit 'and with this contention are we all born, drawing death from our origin, and bearing nature's corruption, and contention or victory of the first transgression in our members... for in (Adam) were we all, since we all were that one man, who, through the woman who was made of himself before sin, fell into sin' (*City*, XIII, 13-14). Moreover for Augustine transgressive desire seems almost produced by the law it contravenes; the soul of postlapsarian man - 'delighted with perverse liberty' (*City*, XIII, 13) - determines to transgress a Divine law which he is not merely commanded to obey but which actually constitutes him, such law being 'written in the hearts of men' (*Confessions*, p. 25).

Dare we surmise that Divine law not only creates the soul which transgresses that law but also incites the desire to transgress it, this desire being inseparable from the delight of 'perverse liberty'? Certainly Augustine, citing 1 Corinthians, recognizes the severe dialectic which lends credence to that proposition: 'the law which forbids sin is the strength of sin... for the forbidding of unlawful desires increases them, where righteousness is not of power to suppress all such desires to sin' (*City of God*, XIII, 5).

Equally certainly, perversion is at the heart of those contradictions in Christiantheodicy which ultimately sunder faith itself, most notably the idea that we are created wicked, that God himself bears 'the ultimate responsibility for the existence of evil.' (Hick, p. 264)<sup>4</sup>. Even that evil is intrinsic to good. This of course has the happy consequence of making God rather than Satan the ultimate or original pervert. This accusation is ingeniously countered by John Donne who shifts the accusation of perversity back on itself: 'It is the perversest assertion that God gives man temporal things to ensnare him'. The signifier begins to slide quite wildly...

Perverse or not, the idea that we are created wicked is a heresy never entirely suppressed in Christianity. It surfaces memorably around 1607 as Fulke Greville's 'wearisome condition of humanity' - 'Born under one law, to another bound: / Created sick, commanded to be sound'<sup>4</sup>.

By tracing the second paradox, that man is created desiring that which is forbidden, back to a perverse God, we in fact trace it back to the first paradox, that perversion originates in that which it subverts, in this case the Divine Order. A can of worms indeed, but a very old one, as John Hick has shown.

But let's for the moment let God off the hook; let's assume that he, like President Regan, is innocent or at least ignorant; that perversion actually originates with his one-time deputy, Satan, and that Eve was his first convert/pervert. This is the official line. It is a myth of origin which will legitimate violence against and subjection of women for centuries to come. This brings me to the Othello passage. It shows that myth working to legitimate violence subjection and displacement.

Othello himself subscribes to the reason/passion binary. He believes Desdemona has succumbed to depraved passion. Later he believes his own reason has similarly succumbed with disastrous results - hence his final self-identification with the Turks. But the truly subversive element in all this - what effects the subversion of reason in others - is not passion but Iago's perverse rationality (on this common sense see Sinfield). As Stephen Greenblatt shows, Iago's so-called evil is of the quintessentially civilised kind, the fashioning of self and others. (I suggest in passing that the reason/passion binary, another Renaissance commonplace, increasingly works to displace disruption from within the rational and civilising process onto man's - or, as we shall see, more usually woman's - baser nature, her passionate excess, that which civilization struggles to control and supersede).

---

<sup>4</sup>-John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Glasgow: Collins, 1968).

Nature figures significantly in the process. For Brabantio it's against 'all rules of nature' that Desdemona could desire Othello; 'for nature so pre-post'rously to err' it must have been suborned by witchcraft - 'practices of cunning hell'.

When Othello comes to echo these words a crucial and fatal shift occurs: now nature, in the form of female desire, becomes intrinsically evil, a cunning hell in its own right:

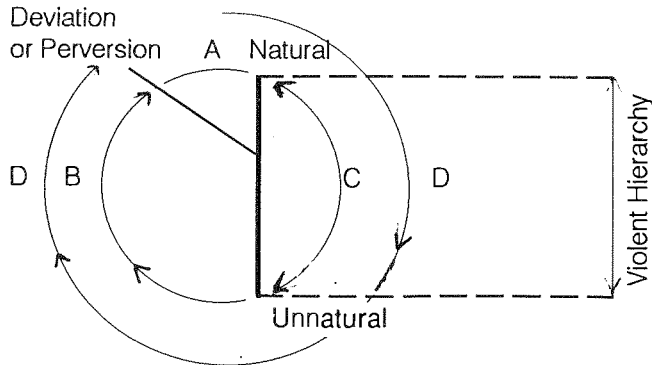
Othello: 'And yet, how nature erring from itself --'

Iago: 'Ay, there's the point, as (to be bold with you)  
Not to affect many proposed matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
whereto we see in all things nature tends --  
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,  
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.'

Othello, III, iii.

Nature erring from itself; the perverse originating within the natural: Othello imagines, and Iago exploits, the paradoxical movement of the perverse: a straying from which is also a contradiction of; a divergence which is imagined to subvert that form which it departs in the instant that it does depart. In short, from within an erring movement, a perverse divergence within nature, there erupts its opposite, the 'unnatural'. All this in seven terrifying lines which effectively sign Desdemona's death warrant. (Later, when Othello once more thinks of Desdemona's imagined treachery he again conceives it in terms of the quintessentially perverse movement: 'She can turn, and turn, an yet go on / And turn again').

In the accusation of perversion/deviation misogyny is rampant but so too is racism: Iago demonises Desdemona and Othello, she as the one who has degenerate desire, he as the object of that desire. In this passage we're again confronted with that powerful but complex relationship between the natural/unnatural binary, and the perverse. I've tried to represent it diagrammatically:



(a note on the diagram: it aims for a clarity of representation whose effects is to show better the complexity of the processes involved, a complexity which eventually renders inadequate the diagram which made it visible).

That narrow arc (A) between the natural and the perverse, is the cultural marking or demonising of difference, albeit a difference whose meaning is barely coherent (nature erring from itself). That much wider arc (b), between the unnatural and the perverse, is the field of displacement, the folding up of the unnatural into (it now appearing as) the perverse. And what is marked on that other side of the diagram (C) is really what makes the entire process possible: the natural/unnatural binary is only ever a differential relation - that is, a difference which is always also one of intimate though antagonistic interdependence.

Indeed, one might say that the normal, in recognizing the perverse is only ever recognizing itself (which is not to say the two things are identical); this can be represented by that clockwise continuum (D) - from the natural, through the unnatural, to the perverse.

The process of displacement (B) often figures in the construction of the perverse and the unnatural, and I want to explore it further, still with reference to the passage from *Othello*. It is extraordinary just how much treachery and insurrection Iago manages to attribute to Desdemona in just six lines. In effect we are witnessing a massive displacement. Let me explain.

*Othello* is partly a play about impending war. Venetian civilization is at stake, at least to the extent that its military has moved to Cyprus to defend the island against the encroaching Turks. Alvin Kernan, for example, has sketched

what he sees as the 'symbolic geography' of the play, and the effect it creates of a beleaguered civilization:

'The outer limits of the world of *Othello* are defined by the Turks - the infidels, the unbelievers, while Othello himself tells of a beyond inhabited by the barbaric and the monstrous. If Venice stands for order, law and reason, Cyprus, as a vulnerable outpost, is a garrison town where civilisation is to be defended by Othello himself of savage origins and a converted Christian'.

Richard Marienstras shows how, at this time, England's xenophobia was increasing in spite, or maybe because of, the fact that it was also embarking on colonization and expansion. This generated real conflict between, if you like, centrifugal and centripetal tendencies, one consequence of which was a paranoid search for the internal counterparts of external threats. The famous *Homily Against Disobedience and Rebellion* (1571) spoke of the enemy within weakening the state and rendering it vulnerable to foreign invasion. A Royal edict of 1601 ordered that all Negroes and blackmoors should be expelled from England.

For many in early modern England then, the impending confrontation in *Othello* was one between civilisation and barbarism. (Although, as Martin Orkin has shown, the struggle for Cyprus was in actuality a fight between imperialist powers).

According to Iago Desdemona's 'thoughts unnatural' involve a threefold transgression: of 'clime, complexion, and degree'; that is, region, colour and rank; or, even: country, race and class, three of civilisation's most jealously policed boundaries. Through that double process of discrimination/legitimation, nature helps secure and police all three boundaries.

Is it coincidence then that what Desdemona violates - country, race and class - are all three at risk in the war with the Turks? Country, obviously; race in the sense that the enemy is, in the terms of the play, racially and culturally inferior; class, or degree, in the sense that it is the indispensable basis both of the culture being defended and of the military doing the defending. So surely what we witness here is a classic instance of internal displacement: an external threat recast as internal deviation. (This goes along with the production of an absolute internal difference - masculine honour and homosocial integrity). Perhaps such displacement, by reproducing internally an imaginary, demonised counterpart of the enemy without, permits a rehearsal of the violence and retribution not as yet unleashed on the enemy without?.

In short, through imagined sexual transgression the perverse subject - the desiring woman - becomes a surrogate alien, a surrogate Turk. (An

identification which Othello reenacts, now with himself as the Turk, just before he kills himself).

I have tried to show how this occurs by analysing what is simultaneously recognized and disavowed in the concepts of perversion and deviation. I suggest that the semantic histories of these concepts, largely lost with their appropriation by sexology in the nineteenth century, and later psychoanalysis, anticipate a fundamental deconstructive (or post-structuralist/modernist or whatever) proposition. It is this: often, that which a culture designates as alien, utterly other and incommensurably different, is not so. That culture exists in a relationship of difference with the alien, which is also a relationship of fundamental, antagonistic dependence- most obviously in terms of the binary opposition, Derrida's 'violent hierarchy'.

At this point I must halt this analysis to consider some of its more general implications. First, in choosing to discuss nature I want to illustrate the (as it were) 'invisible' violence of representation generally and of this concept in particular. Further, by discussing displacement and perversion, I want to indicate the complexity of the social process which a political/materialist analysis addresses, and also to suggest that, though largely ignored, perversion is of central importance in Renaissance culture, and for an analysis of that and many other cultures.

I have dissociated, on historical grounds, my sense of perversion from Freud's. There are at least two reasons for this, and both involve reversals of psychoanalytic emphasis. First, I believe that psychoanalysis is wrong to the extent that it insists on a primary one way displacement of sexuality into culture; on the contrary, as my entire analysis implies, displacement also goes the other way: social crisis and conflict are displaced into sexuality. Moreover this may well be the more important kind of displacement. This is why one crucial task for a sexual politics is precisely to chart this displacement of the political into the sexual (in contrast, for example, to the task of liberating the sexual). Second, far from wanting to give a psychoanalytic reading of the Renaissance or of Shakespeare, I am at the moment more interested in doing the opposite, that is, to use the Renaissance to read Freud, to historicize psychoanalysis. And this is one of the things it means to say that cultural materialism is necessarily both theoretical and historical.

And yet, after reading Freud we cannot read the Renaissance in quite the same way again. Another reason why theoretical and historical analyses are inseparable. And so I willingly acknowledge not only that I have used psychoanalytic concepts in this paper, but that the processes I've been describing are at one level irreducibly psychic. Moreover, and I've only time to allude to this in passing, I think that Freud's theory of perversion - a theory often played down even in radical appropriations of psychoanalysis, and even more

so in conservative ones - is one of the most changeling of all theories of authority, its subversion and containment. This is apparent for example in Freud's scandalous contention that what civilisation designates as unnatural and perverse is, in fact, through sublimation, actually the very basis of civilisation.

Given that a materialist criticism is equally about the cultural reproduction of Shakespeare, there is another reason that I've chosen to discuss nature: perhaps nowhere else is the idealist appropriation of the Renaissance by literary criticism more obvious than in what it has made of nature in that period, and in Shakespeare especially. Too often in such criticism - and indeed in some scholarship - nature is accepted or reproduced in mystified form. And this is not only the case with idiosyncratic criticism - for example Wilson Knight's great creating nature - but also, I would argue, with the more scholarly and justifiably influential work of, say, the New Arden editors. Consider for example the Arden editions of two of the plays discussed here, Frank Kermode's *The Tempest* and J.W. Lever's *Measure for Measure*. Both rightly accord a central place to nature in their respective editions, yet neither adequately addresses the discursive violence of the natural/unnatural binary, either as it occurs in the period, or is represented in the plays. That omission marks one crucial difference between my perspective and theirs. But at the same time it is not thereby a difference which leads me to reject wholesale their scholarship. On the contrary, the scholarship and intelligence of their editions remains indispensable for a materialist perspective. I'm not sure I can say the same about the New Arden edition of the third play discussed here, *Othello*. Its editor does not actually discuss nature in his introduction. Yet it is, perhaps, only because of fundamental unexamined assumptions about nature that this introduction has been charged with being racist in implication. My point here is only that there can be no simple repudiation of the materialist project on scholarly grounds. All three New Arden editions are deeply political in their assumptions and effects, if not in their conscious projects.

And then of course there's the larger critical project in which Shakespeare as English national poet also figures as the embodiment of those discriminating concepts which grow from nature - maturity, profound insight, authenticity and normality - concepts which help keep at bay the sometimes challenging differences of Shakespeare's contemporaries, not to mention the challenging differences within the literary critic's own society. An example: Simon Shepherd, in his excellent recent book on Marlowe<sup>5</sup>, points out how some critics have distinguished Marlowe from Shakespeare: Marlowe's perverse sexuality is suggested as the source for his alleged inferiority, his obsessiveness, fierce partiality and lack of maturity and balance. All this is contrasted with Shakespeare's balanced, mature, wisely inclusive vision. In a word, Shakespeare's 'natural' genius.

---

5.-Simon Shepherd, *Marlow and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986).

It might all have been so straightforward if it were not for Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. How could he? Or, rather, for the English, how could he have been so careless? Last year, of the new books addressing the *Sonnets*, Joseph Pequigney's *Such is My Love* and Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men* were of special interest<sup>6</sup>. The first makes the strongest case yet put for the homosexuality of the *Sonnets*. The second argues that they are not homosexual so much as homosocial, this being defined by Sedgwick as a process whereby men's 'heterosexual desire' for women serves as a kind of detour on the way to a closer, but homophobic bonding with other men. Quite apart from which interpretation one sides with, of whether or not the sonnets are homosexual (and I incline more to Sedgwick's view, seeing the homosocial dimension of the *Sonnets* as more interesting and revealing than their homosexuality) the literary criticism which has disavowed the possibility of the *Sonnet's* or Shakespeare's homosexuality stands as just another fascinating episode in the continuing history of nature as normative ideology.

Last but by no means least, there is the question of Shakespeare in education. I've only time to say this: materialist criticism is less about the academic pursuit of disinterested scholarship than the intellectual commitment to cultural analysis. The intellectual's counterpart as student is surely someone enabled to read culture with a sensitivity equal to, and probably exceeding, that which they were once expected to read the great tradition. Reading literature is subsumed in a larger project of reading culture. I honestly think that, for some of those students, their freedom, if not their lives, may partly depend on their success in that larger project.

---

6.-Joseph Pequigney, *Such is my Love* (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

-Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Man Homosocial Desire* (Columbia U.P., 1985).



# Othello and the Politics of Character

Alan Sinfield. Sussex University.

## 1) Telling Stories

The first thing that might strike one in *Othello* is that all the characters are telling stories. At the start, Iago and Roderigo are concocting a story -a sexist and racist story- for Brabantio:

'Even now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tupping your white ewe...'

(I.i. 88-9)

She is in 'the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor' (I.i. 126). So Brabantio has a story to tell the Senate:

'She is abused, stol'n from me and corrupted,  
By spells and medicines, bought of mountebanks,  
For nature so preposterously to err,  
(Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,)  
Sans witchcraft could not.'

(I.iii. 60-4)

However, this story is contested by another -Othello's account of his relations with Desdemona:

'I will a round unvarnish'd tale deliver,  
Of my whole course of love.'

(I.iii. 90-1)

And Othello's story is, that he told a story. Brabantio 'Still question'd me the story of my life' (I.iii. 129), and this story attracted Desdemona. She asked to hear it through, observing,

'If I had a friend that lov'd her,  
I should but teach him how to tell my story,  
And that would woo her.'

(I.iii. 163-5)

---

1.-Othello is quoted from the New Arden edition, ed. M.R. Ridley (London: Methuen, 1962).

Desdemona, with some of the authority of the ruling elite, corroborates this story for the Senate.

Stories are important because they tell us what the world is like. They make people appear thus or thus, suggesting the scope of human potential; they tell us how people behave and what will be the consequence of this or that intervention. When they are believed, they make things happen, or not. Individual ideas and actions make sense -to others and to ourselves- only within a framework of language and understanding that is working in the world before we arrive, and affords the conditions not just for ideas and actions, but for the very continuing of life. As Nigel Harris points out, even the question 'What is a chair?' makes sense only within a system of meanings; otherwise a chair might be a bundle of sticks for making a fire or beating an enemy about the head.<sup>2</sup>

There are stories everywhere, in speech and behaviour as well as formal narrative. In the media, they are not just in the articles and programmes labelled 'fiction' and 'drama', but in those on current affairs, sport, party politics, science, religion, the arts, and those specified as education and for children. They are in the advertisements, and in literary criticism. As to work, the definitions of tasks to be undertaken depend upon them, and the relations between the people involved- some face to face, some very distant. And in our intimate relations there are stories telling us who we are as individuals, who other individuals are, and how we relate to them. Stephen Greenblatt approaches the issue by comparing two alternative attitudes to reality. On the one hand is a unitary, totalising vision which claims an explanation for everything prior to particular experience. On the other is the supposed uniqueness of each instance. But such an opposition only appears to include all the possibilities. Instead, in Greenblatt's phrasing, we inhabit 'a network of lived and narrated stories, practices, strategies, representations, fantasies, negotiations, and exchanges that, along with the surviving aural, tactile, and visual traces, fashion our experiences of the past, of others, and of ourselves'.<sup>3</sup>

I would stress that stories are lived. They are not outside ourselves, something we hear or read about. They make sense for us -of us- because we have been and are in them. They are already proceeding when we arrive in the world and we come to consciousness in their terms. Our language is the language that fits the stories, there is no other. As the world shapes itself around and through us, certain interpretations of experience strike us as plausible because they fit with what we have experienced already. They become

---

2.-Nigel Harris, *Believes in Society* (Harmondworth: Penguin, 1961), pp. 36-7.

3.-Stephen Greenblatt, 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture', in Patricia Parker and David Quint, eds., *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins U.P., 1986), p. 218.

common sense, they 'go without saying'. Coling Summer writes of the 'circle of social reality': 'produces its own social reality at the same time as social reality produces its own understanding'<sup>4</sup>. Since any given culture is organized in terms of certain stories, as we live in it we find that those stories work. Our realities are constituted in that network of stories.

Stories are inevitably social: they are credible, plausible, in terms of prevailing discourses. If your story is not thus plausible, you may be proclaimed an original genius; more likely, you will be judged insane. So the conditions and criteria of plausibility are crucial; they delimit what we take to be normally possible. This may be observed in the process through which the Senate comes to accept that Desdemona was legitimately attracted by Othello. Brabantio's point is that such attraction is incredible, that is why he must have enchanted her:

'For I'll refer me to all things of sense,  
(If she in chains of magic were not bound)  
Whether a maid, so tender, fair, and happy,  
So opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd  
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,  
Would ever have (to incur a general mock)  
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
Of such a thing as thou?'

(I.ii. 64-71)

The Venetians generally share the assumption that Blacks are inferior outsiders, as we see even in the terms through which they accept Othello. Desdemona accepts that as a black man he is superficially inappropriate for a husband when she declares 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind' (I.iii. 252). And the Duke uses the terms of racial prejudice while seeming to deny them when he concludes: 'Your son-in-law is far more fair that black' (I.iii. 290).

Othello counters this partly by appearing very calm and responsible - more Venetian than the Venetians. But also, he uses the very idea of implausibility: he retells a story of 'hair-breadth escapes', redemption from slavery, hills 'whose heads touch heaven', cannibals, anthropophagi, 'and men whose heads/ Do grow beneath their shoulders' (I.iii. 129-45). In this context, such unlikely adventures are plausible to the Venetians, because they grant part of Brabantio's case - that Othello is an exotic. Othello has no credit by normal upper-class Venetian criteria, but when he plays on his strangeness they appreciate him; it is related to the barbarian that Brabantio sees. The Venetians do not abandon their racist assumptions, they reorient them so as to accommodate a new story within their scheme of plausibility.

---

4.-Colin Sumner, *Reading Ideologies* (London, New York and San Francisco: Academic Press, 1979), p. 288.

Greenblatt remarks how Othello's identity depends upon a constant performance of his 'story'<sup>5</sup>. When we first see him he is rehearsing the story of his nobility and service to the state (I.ii. 18-24); we may suppose that marrying Desdemona is, for him, the ultimate confirmation of it. But Iago tells Othello another tale, and this convinces him that he is indeed that dangerous exotic imagined by Brabantio:

'I know our country disposition well...

She did deceive her father, marrying you...

Not to affect many proposed matches,  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereto we see in all things nature tends...

(III.iii. 205, 210, 133-5)

Othello is persuaded to believe the story of his essential difference, of his unassimilability into Venetian society. 'Haply, for I am black', he muses (III.iii. 267), and he begins to act the part of the 'erring barbarian' (I,iii, 356-7) that Iago and Brabantio believe him to be. As Ania Loomba says,

'Othello moves from being a colonized subject existing on the terms of white Venetian society and trying to internalise its ideology, towards being marginalized, outcast and alienated from it in every way, until he occupies his 'true' position as its 'other'. Moreover his precarious entry into the white world is ruptured by his relation with Desdemona, which was intended to secure it in the first place'<sup>6</sup>.

## 2) Why Character Criticism is Wrong and Reactionary

My insistence on plausibility and the social dimension of stories repudiates the emphasis of character criticism, which seeks the explanation for events in the qualities of individuals. Of course, this is not the first assault on character criticism. In the 1930s, L.C. Knights smiled at the naive question, 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?', and G. Wilson Knight alleged that each play was 'a visionary whole, close-knit in personification, atmospheric suggestion, and direct poetic-symbolism'<sup>7</sup>. This was a symbolist-modernist poetics; Knights' *Wheel of Fire* opened with a preface by T.S. Eliot. Also at that

---

5.-Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago U.P., 1980), p. 245.

6.-Ania Loomba, 'Disorderly Women in Jacobean Tragedy: Towards a Materialist-Feminist Critique', unpub. diss. (U. of Sussex, 1987), pp. 166-7; to be published by (Oxford U.P.: 1989). See also Doris Adler, 'The Rhetoric of Black and White in Othello', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 25 (1974), pp. 248-57.

7.-L.C. Knights, 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' (1933), in Knights, *Explorations* (London: Chatto, 1946); G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930; London: Methuen, 1949), p. 11.

time, character criticism was resisted by scholars like Muriel Bradbrook and Lily P. Campbell, who insisted on the dependence of the plays upon conventions of story and stage-craft current when Shakespeare was writing. Campbell wanted to show 'Shakespeare's incorporation in his tragedies of the prevailing ideas of the humanists in regard to passion'. Bradbrook denied that the characters are transcriptions from life, arguing rather that they depend on three main conventional principles: the superhuman nature of heroes, decorum, and the theory of humours<sup>8</sup>.

However, character criticism was not seriously hindered by the modernists or the scholars. Their approaches tended to insulate the plays from present-day, common-sense experience, whereas character criticism opens the plays, relatively, to the ways audiences and readers think and live, often implying that the characters are 'like us', and valuable models for behaviour. Critics and scholars have sought to retrieve Shakespeare from such middle-brow attentions, and relocate him in a more specialised milieu - in effect the academy - where historical knowledge or refined sensibility may be brought to bear. However, such a powerful cultural token as Shakespeare cannot be contained within the academy, and character criticism has continued fairly unhampered in less professionalised venues, including the theatre and schools<sup>9</sup>.

Instead of character, analysis should focus upon the social organisation that produces and ratifies the prevailing criteria of plausibility. I argue from the stand-point of cultural materialism, and one goal of the present paper is to show that this approach is more relevant, sensible, and exciting, and of a far greater interpretive power. It denies that what happens in plays, or in the world, is adequately explained by reference to a fixed, autonomous and self-determining core of individual being. Rather, that subjectivity is itself produced, in all its complexity, by the social organisation. Character criticism is conservative, because it directs attention away from structures and institutions and the power by which they are informed. It seeks the cause of the events of *Othello* in the individuals, whereas they derive, far more importantly, from the social order. Also, character criticism makes it seem hard to change anything. People are as they are, and that is how the world is. For the counterpart of the individual is the universal: each character is essentially himself or herself, it is supposed, and yet ultimately they all partake of a universal humanity. Conservative British Government Minister Nigel Lawson said in 1983: 'I am not a great believer in

---

8.-Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (1930; London: Methuen, 1961), pp.vii; M.C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions in Elizabethan Tragedy* (1935; Cambridge U.P., 1960), pp. 50-54. On earlier attempts to reject character criticism, see John Drskakis, 'Introduction', in Drakakis, ed., *Alternatives Shakespeares* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 9-12, 18-22.

9.-See Alan Sinfield, 'Give an Account of Shakespeare and Education...', in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare* (Manchester U.P., 1985), ch. VIII.

progress... Man doesn't change. Or man's nature doesn't change. The same problems are there in different forms'. And he called Shakespeare to witness: 'Shakespeare was a Tory, without any doubt'<sup>10</sup>. When the individual and the universal come into focus, the social, the historical and the political become blurred or disappear from view; and they are precisely the frameworks through which we might observe the operations of power, and envisage political change.

Iago's stories work only because they are believed -by Roderigo, Brabantio, the Senate, eventually Othello himself. And they are believed because they are credible, within the prevailing norms. Iago remarks that the notion that Desdemona loves Cassio is 'apt and of great credit' (II.i. 182); and that his advice to Cassio to press Desdemona for his reinstatement is 'Probal to thinking' (II.iii. 329). The racism of the play should not be identified just in Iago's character, therefore (though it may be identified there), but in the structure of Venetian society. Concentrating on Othello's and Iago's character tends to obscure the social dimension without which Iago could not operate. As Peter Stallybrass puts it, Iago's story works 'not because Iago is superhumanly ingenious but, to the contrary, because his is the voice of "common sense", the ceaseless repetition of the always-already "known", the culturally "given"'<sup>11</sup>. Othello is scripted, we may say, by the powerful white men of his society.

It is Iago who argues against the social constitution of character and the power of stories. When Cassio has been discovered in a drunken brawl he laments: 'Reputation, reputation, I ha' lost my reputation!' (II.iii. 254). Iago replies:

'reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit, and lost without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself such a loser.'

(II.iii. 260-3)

This is actually absurd, since reputation is by definition a social concept. Its only meaning is to do with how one is regarded by others. Iago is telling Cassio to disregard the whole social dimension of language, to make up his own meanings for words; he would be right if you could live outside society. The irony, of course, is that Iago is the great story-maker. His whole strategy is to make things happen by telling stories - redescribing and hence reorienting even what has just happened. That is what he is doing here with Cassio, who

10.-Quoted by Margot Heinemann, 'How Brecht Read Shakespeare', in Dollimore and Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare*, p. 203. See also Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), chs. X, XVI.

11.-Peter Stallybrass, 'Patriarcal Territories: The Body Enclosed', in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nansy J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance* (Chicago U.P.: 1986), p. 139.

manifestly has suffered in his reputation. In denying the social dimension of stories, Iago is obscuring the very process by which he works. He argues that 'tis in ourselves, that we are thus, or thus' (I.iii. 319-20), but he sustains his own identity by telling himself a sequence of stories (the famous excess of motivation). When challenged to tell his true story he has nothing to say: his social validation has all been all deception, and when it is exposed he has no existence.

### 3) Cultural Production and the State

I have used the term 'story' partly for its accessibility: a more substantial phrase is cultural production. Societies need to produce, materially, to continue -they need food, shelter, warmth; goods to exchange with other societies, a transport and information infrastructure to carry those processes and so on. Also, they have to produce culturally. They need knowledges to keep material production going -diverse technical skills and wisdoms in agriculture, industry, science, medicine, economics, law, geography, languages, politics and so on. And they need understanding, intuitive and explicit, of a system of social relationships through which the whole process can take place more or less evenly. The term 'Cultural production' recognizes the crucial role these processes perform in the development and continuance of social systems. And it draws attention to the fact that culture does not just appear out of people's minds as a 'good idea': it is fundamental to the social order.

Most societies retain more or less their current shape not because subversives are infiltrated, penalised or neutralised, though they are, but because most people believe that things have to be more or less as at present -that they cannot be improved upon, at least through the methods at hand. That is why one recognizes a dominant ideology: were there not such a powerful discourse, people would not acquiesce in the injustice and humiliation that they experience in so many societies. The dominant ideology strives to occupy all the space of interpretation, rendering alternatives implausible, or even unenvisageable. The power to make your story stick is therefore very important -then you can win elections, for instance, or persuade people to buy your product, or accept conscription, or sexism, or atomic weaponry, or unemployment. The most plausible stories, by definition, work to the advantage of the prevailing order.

Cultural production occurs everywhere and all the time in the social order, but some institutions are vastly more influential than others. The choice between the stories of Brabantio and Othello that the Senate makes reminds us that the state has both an interest in and a decisive effect upon the criteria of plausibility. It has written what the Duke calls 'the bloody book of law', and decrees who shall read it (I.iii. 67- 70). Brabantio's argument is partly that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona threatens the state:

'For if such actions may have passage free,  
Bond-slaves, and pagans, shall our statesmen be.'

(I.ii. 98-9)

The idea is familiar enough from other Shakespeare plays: such a marriage -without parental permission, outside the ruling oligarchy, and outside the race- undermines the whole structure of patriarchal, rank and racial authority. But the Senate is influenced also by another story. As Iago already knows, 'the state... /Cannot with safety cast him' (I.i. 147, 9). A Turkish fleet has been seen,

'bearing with frank appearance  
Their purposes towards Cyprus: Signior Montano,  
Your trusty and most valiant servitor,  
With his free duty recommends you thus  
And prays you to believe him.'

(I.iii. 38-42)

They do believe him, and need Othello to deal with the situation, so they are pleased to find the marvellous exotic as an alternative to the erring barbarian. Their crediting of his story is not disinterested.

At the end of the play, Othello tries to control the story that will survive him:

'I pray you in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of them as they are.'

(V.ii. 341-3)

He says he has loved not wisely but too well, but his main concern is to resituate himself in terms of the expectations of the state. The terms in which Othello attempts this readjustment reveal, once more, the prevailing criteria of plausibility. Othello recognizes himself as what the governing elite has always told him he is: an ignorant, barbaric outsider -like the 'base Indian' who threw away a pearl because he didn't realise that the European upper class place a special value upon pearls. Yet Othello still believes that killing people does not altogether disqualify him as a good Venetian:

'And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him thus.'

[Stabs himself]

(V.ii. 352-7)

He is both the outsider who brings discredit upon Venice, and its defender who kills such people; he resolves the contradiction by killing himself.

Few people discussing this speech worry about the Turk whom Othello murders for hitting a Venetian and slandering the state. Being malignant, and circumcised and wearing a turban into the bargain, he hardly seems to require the sensitive attention of literary critics in Britain and North America. The character critic might consider his death a last-minute revelation of Othello's long-standing propensity to desperate violence when people tell him stories he does not like. But the violence here is not Othello's alone. It is what the Venetian state expects -or so we must assume from Othello's use of the incident to establish his credit, the fact that despite this murder he is in good standing in Venice as a general, and Cassio's immediate comment: 'he was great of heart' (V.ii. 362). Othello's violence is structured into the state story which he inhabits. The later part of his career, in fact, has been devoted entirely to Venetian state violence -as Martin Orkin has pointed out, he is sent to Cyprus to secure it for the colonial power, to represent the values of the metropolis in the face of a challenge from another imperialist state<sup>12</sup>. The contradiction between the noble and barbaric Venetians which Othello identifies in himself is not, primarily, his personal problem. It is, in fact, the *raison d'être* of the state to distinguish the civilised from the barbaric, and that project is urgent, in most states that we know of, because in actuality they are not very different. Othello's particular circumstances bring into visibility, for those who want to see, the violence upon which the state and its civilisation rest.

However, the very last lines of the play are spoken by Lodovico, the Venetian nobleman and representative of the Senate. He and they will control the official version:

'Myself will straight aboard, and to the state  
This heavy act with heavy heart relate.'

So it is in our world: rich and powerful institutions normally tell the final stories. We can only continue the struggle to show that their versions are not the only ones possible.

---

12.-Martin Orkin, *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* (Craighall, South Africa: Ad. Donker, 1987), pp. 88-96.

#### 4) Daughters and Wives

Generally in Shakespeare plays, as elsewhere, women are scripted by men. Desdemona, like Cordelia, sees only two possibilities:

'My noble father,  
I do perceive here a divided duty:....  
I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband:  
And so much duty as my mother show'd  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge, that I may profess,  
Due to the Moor my Lord.'

(I.iii. 180-9)

Desdemona's experience leads her to believe that this is the inevitable story. Even so, her version is proving problematic.

Ideally, in fictional Venice and Shakespearean England, the transition from daughter to wife -from one set of duties to another- would be accomplished smoothly, with the agreement of all parties. But there was a major difficulty here, in the ideology of gender relations. Marriage was supposed to be a fulfilling personal relationship, but also it was the institution through which property arrangements were made. It was held both that the people being married should love each other, and that they should act in obedience to their parents. On the one hand, we find Henry Smith asking in 'A Preparative to Marriage': 'If children may not make other contracts without [parent's] good will, shall they contract marriage, which have nothing to maintain it after, unless they return to beg of them whom they scorned before?'<sup>13</sup>. Like other business deals, it is improper to enter into marriage unless you can sustain the costs. On the other hand, Protestant theology was heightening the contradiction by placing particular emphasis on a mutually fulfilling relationship. This ideal came not only through sermons and homilies, but committed literature like Sidney's *Arcadia*, which celebrated other notions of love than those traditional in romances and courtly writing. Argalus and Pathenia are married:

'A happy couple: he joying in her, she joying in herself, but in herself, because she enjoyed him; both increasing their riches by giving to each other; each making one life double, because they made a double life one'<sup>14</sup>.

---

13.-Henry Smith, *Works*, 3 vols., ed. Thomas Fuller (Edinburgh, 1889), vol. I, p. 19.

14.-Sir Philip Sidney, *Arcadia*, ed., Maurice Evans (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 501. See Alan Sinfield, *Literature in Protestant England 1560-1660* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), ch. IV; and Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), ch. VII.

Conflict between parents and children about marriage comes up all the time in plays of the period, and it remains prominent in literature through into the nineteenth century. This is characteristic of the way stories work in a culture. The issues that require most attention -most assiduous and continuous reworking- are the awkward ones. When a part of our worldview threatens disruption by manifestly failing to cohere, then we must reorganise and retell its story again and again, trying to get it into shape -back into the old shape if we are conservative minded, or into a new shape that we can develop and apply if we are more adventurous. All the apparatuses of cultural production are involved in this, including literature and fiction. That is why writing of a given period returns all the time to certain themes: they are the awkward ones that are unresolved and that people therefore want to read and write about. And it is why fiction is often complex and contradictory: it is working at the tricky themes. The arranged versus the love match is a recurring theme until the late nineteenth century, when it was for most people in Britain resolved in favour of children's preferences. Roughly speaking, in comedies parents are eventually accommodated to children's wishes; in tragedies, like *Othello*, precipitate actions without parental authority lead to disaster.

This contradictory moment in the ideology of gender relations afforded one distinct point at which the woman could produce a crisis in her own story and that of men. At the point of marital decision she could disturb the social structure -and bring its oppressiveness and manipulation into visibility. As a daughter, her path was clear enough, and then as wife and mother. But at the transition between the two, the script was less clear and hence the woman's moment of significance. This usually provokes especially urgent scripting by males -we see it, for instance, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Measure for Measure*, *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Desdemona marrying inappropriately and without permission throws the whole male system into disarray, and just when the men are busy with one of their wars -killing people because of their honour and their property, proving their masculinity to each other. The chief (male) council of the state has to delay its business because of Desdemona's marriage: it too affects the security of the state.

Of course, the woman's significance ends once the men have sorted things out for themselves. She may be recentered through childbearing, especially if she doesn't do it to the man's satisfaction. And she is important when she dies, because then the man is able to dispose again of his masculinity and rearrange his property. The other great point at which the woman can disturb the patriarchal system -and hence the other great theme of literature- is adultery. This upsets the husband's honour, masculinity, and (through the bearing of illegitimate children) property. Even the rumour of Desdemona's adultery is enough to send some of the powerful men in the state into another anxiety - especially since, after all, they aren't going to justify

themselves by fighting the Turkish men<sup>15</sup>. If it were true, she might feel rather pleased with herself, but she has strangely lost her spirit, and suffers abuse and violence from her husband.

## 5) Scripting Desdemona

What alternatives does the play suggest for Desdemona? How far does it endorse the script written for her by the men of the play, with its narrow range of possibilities? Bianca re-presents that narrow range, reorganised by her lower position in the class structure: she is condemned both because she sells her sexuality to buy bread and clothes, and because she dotes on Cassio - "tis the strumpet's plague/ To beguile many, and be beguil'd by one' (IV.i. 93-7). Both her looseness and her fidelity are wrong (it is not suggested how else she would get bread and clothes).

Desdemona's relationship with Emilia is important, and suggests the comfort and resource some women must historically have found. Emilia sees some of what is going on, and sometimes her speech beginning, 'But I do think it is their husband's faults/ If wives do fall' (IV.iii. 86-103), is celebrated:

'Let husbands know,  
Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,  
And have their palates both for sweet, and sour,  
As husbands have.'

(IV.iii. 93-6)

Unfortunately this argues only for the extension of the male system to women, not for its revision. In fact, the proposition that wives have desires did not challenge the system in principle; on the contrary, the supposedly special wilfulness and sensuality of women was used to justify their subordination. Emilia recognizes, at the end of the speech, that women are scripted by men: 'The ills we do, their ills instruct us so' (IV.iii. 103). But she cannot envisage any way beyond this position. Indeed, she says just before that she would 'make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch' (IV.iii. 75): the immediate direction for her independence is the serving of her husband's interest. This is poignant enough, for her subservience to Iago (over the handkerchief) has betrayed Desdemona. When the whole plot is blatantly apparent, poor Emilia is still apologising for insubordination:

---

15.-For the thought that the men in Othello are preoccupied for their masculinity but ineffectual, see Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1985), pp. 119-22.

'Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak,  
'Tis proper I obey him, but not now:  
Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home.'

(V.ii. 196-8)

And nor does she: the price of disobedience in the patriarchal order is death, for Emilia as much as Desdemona.

Traditionally, Desdemona hasn't troubled character critics greatly, but there is surely a great mystery. On her first appearance, Desdemona is spectacularly confident, bold and unconventional. She elopes and, summoned to the Senate to explain her independent behaviour, she justifies herself coolly and coherently, confessing without a blush that she was 'half the wooer' (I.iii. 176). And that is not all. When Othello is commissioned for Cyprus and craves 'fit disposition' for his wife, she speaks up uninvited, and on the outrageous theme of women's sexual desire:

'If I be left behind,  
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
The rites for which I love him are bereft me.'

(I.iii. 255-7)

Despite such uncommonly spirited behaviour, Desdemona becomes the most conventional spouse. Mainly we see her wheedling for the restoration of Cassio, in the notorious posture of the wife who thinks she knows how to manage her husband. Even that she does ineptly: despite her earlier intuition on how to address the Senate, she is now stupidly blind to the effect she is having. When Othello begins to abuse her she is easily fearful and consequently dishonest, making matters worse. Above all, through her denials, she is strangely acquiescent:

'those that do teach young babes  
Do it with gentle means, and easy tasks;  
He might ha' chid me so, for, in good faith,  
I am a child at chiding.'

(IV.ii. 113-6)

She kneels to witness to truth, but in the same gesture manifests submission (IV.ii. 150-66). So she calls for her wedding sheets and allows herself to be killed with relatively slight protest (V.ii. 23-85). As Tennenhouse puts it, she 'loses the control over her body she possessed at the opening of the play and, with it, the verbal power to argue for the legitimacy of her sexual behaviour'<sup>16</sup>. Othello kills her by smothering: she is silenced, but already she was barely able to speak to the realities of the situation - 'O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not' (V.ii. 79).

---

16.-Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p.126.

Now, I do not think it implausible, in principle, that Desdemona could be so disheartened by Othello's attitude that she should eventually lose all her original spirit. How this happens could be set out, though it would not be easy to show why she is so conventional and unintelligent when pleading for Cassio, and why she never tries to get to the bottom of what has upset her husband. In Othello's case, we have superb detail on the sequence from confident general to murderer. Of course, he too is a construction; but the manner of that construction is such as to lead an audience (so long as it shares the notions of subjectivity dominant in our culture) to credit him with a continuous consciousness such as, for most purposes, we regard ourselves as having. But Desdemona does not seem to have such a continuous subjectivity; she is less a developing consciousness than a series of positions that women are conventionally supposed to occupy. If critics don't notice this, it is because in each of her successive incarnations she appears pretty much as men expect women to, and because, as Catherine Belsey observes, 'discontinuity of being' can be read, of itself, as 'an "inconstancy" which is seen as characteristically feminine' (*Subject*, p. 149).

In the fuller sense of the word, then, Desdemona has no character; she is an item in the story of Othello, Iago and Venice. Othello asks, 'Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write "whore" upon?' (IV.ii. 73-74). The writing, of course, is done by Othello, Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, the Duke, and Lodovico -they all take Desdemona as a blank page upon which to write their own script. But the play does this as well. It writes Desdemona into a male story.

Desdemona has to be independent and intelligent at the start so that she can marry Othello and defend herself in the Senate. Then she has to be stupid so that she doesn't effectively challenge Iago's plotting. Finally she has to be submissive so that she can die in the role of patiently suffering spouse. Peter Stallybrass argues that 'the play constructs two different Desdemonas': in the first half she is an active agent and has the freedom we associate with the comic heroine; in the second half, she is reformulated as the submissive, tragic victim. Catherine Belsey argues that this is typical of the way women are presented: 'They speak with equal conviction from incompatible subject-positions' (*Subject*, p. 149), and mainly from two 'contrasted female stereotypes, one saintly, submissive, faithful, forgiving and silent, and the other predatory, dominating, usually lustful, destructive and voluble' (p. 165). Belsey invokes an instance that has been generally remarked, Vittoria in *The White Devil* (pp. 160-5)<sup>17</sup>.

---

17.-Stallybrass, 'Patriarchal Territories', p. 141; Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy* (op.cit.), pp. 149, 160-5. M.C. Bradbrook remarked a 'kind of double personality' in characters in plays of the period, produced by 'the very simple and rigid moral framework of the plays' and 'the system of rigidly defined types, of stock motivation and fixed plot' (*Themes and Conventions* (op.cit.), pp. 67-9). But she did not go on to observe that such conventions reproduce the organisation of power relations in that society.

Two incidents particularly have challenged character critics who strive to construct a continuous interiority for Desdemona: on the sea in Act II, scene i, and her sudden thought that 'Lodovico is a proper man' in the midst of her anxieties about Othello's violence as she prepares for bed on her final night (IV. ii. 35). Criticism is perplexed because the incidents are ambiguous: Desdemona's chat with Iago and whispering with Cassio, and her regard for Lodovico, may indeed be courtesy, as Roderigo suggests -but then, Roderigo is besotted and may be over-generous. Eagleton comments: 'The woman is a constantly travestied text, perpetually open to misreading; she is a stumbling-block in the path of lucid interpretation, unable to be proper without promiscuity, frigid when judicious, never warm without being too hot'<sup>18</sup>. The ambiguity is sufficient to allow the audience to replicate the conclusion of most of the men in the play: that there is no smoke without fire. These incidents allow what Lisa Jardine calls 'the shadow of sexual frailty' to hover over Desdemona, despite her technical innocence<sup>19</sup>. Representation slides to meet Iago's slander, offering covert confirmation through the denials. After all, as Iago says, 'She did deceive her father, marrying you' (III.iii. 210). Thus Desdemona may, at some further level of understanding, seem to deserve her fate after all. Then Othello may appear as the victim, in the oft-repeated story of the warrior seduced from his duty -Mars and Venus, Samson and Delilah, and so on. Desdemona makes sense not as a continuous subjectivity, I conclude, but in terms of the stories about 'woman' that were and are told in patriarchal ideology.

## 6) Shakespeare's Scripts

Shakespearean plays are themselves powerful stories. They were this for their original audiences, for whom they offered powerful representations of human behaviour, and from a far stronger monopoly position in the cultural apparatus than anything we now fear. And for us they have the authority of Shakespeare's name, and of 'literature' generally. However, they are contestable: to some degree at least, they can be reoriented and used for more radical purposes than has generally happened hitherto. The task of a political criticism is to seize such opportunities.

Shakespearean plays are fascinated by scripting, but the emphasis often seems conservative. The scripting of women by men is presented generally as good for them. Miranda's marriage in *The Tempest* seems to be all that Prospero has designed it to be. In *Measure for Measure* Mariana is given by the Duke the script she apparently wants. Isabella has her own ideas: she wants

18.-Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 68. For anxiety about Act II, scene i and IV.ii.35, see Ridley's New Arden Edition (op.cit.), pp. 54, 166.

19.-Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983), pp. 75, 119-20, 184-5. Tennenhouse comments: 'Shakespeare does not differ from Iago in terms of the basis upon which gender distinctions should be made' (*Power on Display* (op.cit.), p. 126).

to enter a convent -one of the very few ways a woman might avoid direct subjection to a man. But all the men in the play, from her brother and Lucio to Angelo and the Duke, adopt the same project: to draw her out and get her back into relations with men. Lear's scripting of his daughters is resisted only at the cost of other scripts -marriage for Cordelia, and deception for Goneril and Regan. In fact, Cordelia eventually speaks to Lear's script after all. She leaves her husband and returns to England to look after Lear, taking up arms in his aggressive manner instead of trusting to the love that she invoked initially. Lear is quite satisfied when he believes they are to live in prison together: at last he is caught her.

The scripting that is usually endorsed, though perhaps still ambivalently, is that by powerful men. In early comedies - *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*- Women are allowed to script, though rarely in violation of parental wishes. However, their scripts always lead to the surrender of their power in marriage. Other women who script men are bad -Goneril and Regan, Lady Macbeth, the Queen in *Cymbeline*. When relatively lower-class men attempt to script, the social order is disturbed (by definition), and they have to be stopped or disaster occurs. Scripting from below is subversive; consider Shylock, Malvolio, Cassio, Don John, Iago, Edmund, Macbeth, Caliban.

I offer these comments briskly across the range of the plays, hoping that they will stimulate debate. They suggest a sadly conservative body of stories. However, we do not have to leave matters there. We do not have to accept the most immediately plausible interpretation. To do so, indeed, may involve us in a reactionary politics: the easiest way to make Othello plausible in Britain is to rely on the incipient racism, sexism and superstition in British culture. Why does Othello, who has considerable experience of people, fall so conveniently for Iago's stories? We can make his gullibility plausible by suggesting that black people are generally of a rather simple disposition. To explain why Desdemona becomes so submissive, we might appeal to a supposedly fundamental passiveness of women. Baffled in the attempt to find motive for Iago's malignancy, we can resort to the notion of the Devil, or innate evil. These interpretations might 'make sense'; might 'work', as theatre people say; but only because they activate regressive aspects of our cultural formation. Therefore we should observe and reflect upon the activity of scripting in the plays, rather than simply helping the text into a convenient plausibility.

For literary criticism is another story, and the range of possible interpretations of these plays depends not only on the text, but on the criteria of plausibility currently prevailing. That is why one generation finds the interpretation of another altogether unsatisfactory. The point is not so much what Shakespearean plays mean, but the conceptual framework within which we discuss them. The present paper is designed to help change the story usually told in English Studies, away from conservative modes like character

criticism, and towards a cultural materialism that will help us see the oppressive structures of race, class, gender and sexual orientation in which we live.

## 7) Human Nature Once More

By way of conclusion, I want to confront a commonsense objection to the approach presented here. It is often imagined that focussing upon supposedly autonomous individual characters gives generous scope to human initiative, whereas the insistence that subjectivity is constituted in discourse -my network of stories- traps human beings in a social determinism. However, neither of these views is correct.

The dominant stories are always flawed, culture is always under contest. Social and political conflict occurs as competition between stories: change occurs when a partly new story prevails. As Poulantzas puts it, 'ideology has the precise function of hiding the real contradictions and of reconstituting on an imaginary level a relatively coherent discourse'<sup>20</sup>. This construction can be deconstructed. Stereotypes, such as those which fill the space we call Desdemona, are always insecure, both because they are inadequate to experience in the world and because they are internally contradictory. There is always play in the system, and the task of a political criticism is to look for the points at which ideology reveals itself. So Shakespearean texts need not be pinpointed as either conservative or radical; they are stories through which analysis and discussion can disclose the workings of power.

Character criticism promises a generous openness to the diversity of human experience, but it usually ends up at the same constricting story, of an essential human nature. Its key strategy is the surface/depths model: surface/depths is a powerful means through which one side of an opposition can be credited with the authority of profundity, and the other relegated as superficial. Often it appears as illusion and reality. The former gradually gives way to the latter, and the full revelation of character is achieved only in the last scene; yet it is understood to have been there all the time, available to the shrewd interpreter. In our culture, it is usually the fundamental flaw that will out -the savage Othello underlies the noble one (he may be savage and noble at once, but still the savagery seems more basic). 'Our' essential humanity is disclosed beneath the individual, and essential man is always incapable of fundamental

---

20.-Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. Timothy O'Hagan (London: New Left Books, 1973), p. 207. See also Alan Sinfield, 'Power and Ideology: An Outline Theory and Sidney's Arcadia', in *English Literary History*, 52 (1985), pp. 259-77; Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, 'History and Ideology: the Instance of Henry V', in Drakakis, ed., *Alternative Shakespeares*; Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, pp. 6, 165.

improvement. So there is no point in trying to change the world, the underlying condition will remain the same and you will probably make things worse. It seems best to submit to the world as it is, to acquiesce in the prevailing power relations.

Cultural materialism holds that there is no essential Man - the claim to be presenting such an entity is only a way of trying to add status to the story one is telling. People react in diverse ways in diverse circumstances in diverse cultures. None of these reactions is more profound than the others. They are all the way people behave. The person who betrays his or her comrades, kills them under intolerable stress, is no more 'real' than the caring and cooperative person we see in more congenial circumstances. It is not interesting to show that people behave in extreme ways in extreme conditions. The task of political action, educational and social policy, even cultural analysis, is to avoid placing people in such conditions. None of us can be sure what she or he would do if ordered to become a concentration camp guard; the point is to avoid the establishment of concentration camps. I am trying, steadily, to promote an alternative framework of human possibilities, arguing that the network of stories in which we live and which constructs our world has been made by us in history and society, and may be remade.

# The Merchant of Venice: or Christian Patriarchy and its Discontents.

John Drakakis. University of Stirling.

## I

The 'Advertisement to the Reader' of George Granville's *The Jew of Venice* (1701) excuses this adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* on the grounds that, 'The Foundation of the following Comedy being liable to some objections, it may be wonder'd that any one should make Choice of it to bestow so much labour upon. But the judicious Reader will observe so many Manly and Moral Graces in the Characters and Sentiments, that he may excuse the Story for the sake of the Ornamental parts'.<sup>1</sup> That the writer of 'An Essay upon Unnatural Flights in Poetry', who could describe the function of the poet as being 'To copy out Ideas in the Mind', presenting 'Important Truths', and unfolding with art 'moral mysteries', through metaphors which were 'As Veils transparent'<sup>2</sup>, should be associated with a problematical comedy's 'Ornamental parts' is irony enough; but followed by a Prologue composed by one Bevil Higgons Esq., consisting of a dialogue between the ghosts of Dryden and no less a figure that the Bard himself who then proceeds to describe the action of *The Merchant of Venice* in the following manner:

'Less Heinous Faults our Justice does pursue,  
Today we punish a Stock-jobbing Jew.  
A piece of Justice, terrible and strange;  
Which, if pursued, would make a thin Exchange.  
The Laws Defect the juster Muse supplies,  
Tis only we, can make you Good or Wise,  
Whom Heav'n spares the Poet will chastise.'<sup>3</sup>

then that irony is displaced by an act of dramatic appropriation under whose auspices the reconstituted moralistic ghost of Shakespeare can be made to extract 'ideas' from a text already subject to a determinate reading, within whose boundaries his status as poetic authority is firmly inscribed.

---

1.-H.H. Furness, ed., *The Merchant of Venice* (New Variorum: London, 1888), p. 346.

2.-Joel E. Spingarn, *Critical Essays of the Seventeen Century*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1908-9), pp. 292-3.

3.-(Ibid., p. 347).

Here in line with the hierarchical privileging of 'ideas' over material judicial practice, 'poetic justice' is held to compensate for 'The Laws Defect' in producing a series of moral effects which counterbalance the likely objections to the play. That the ghost of Shakespeare himself should sanction such a move, and that he should be enlisted as subject inscribed within later Restoration poetic discourse along with another ghost, that of Dryden, in a critique of the 'unnaturalness' of contemporary theatrical tastes: 'They know not Nature, for they tast not Thee', is a powerful testimony to the manner in which texts generally, and Shakespearean texts in particular, can be made to disclose, as it were objectively, a series of essentialist myths which are, in reality, generated through determinate reading practices. To this extent, Granville's adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, in which a 'stock-jobbing Jew' can be made to toast his 'mistress': 'My money is my Mistress! Her's to/ Interest upon Interest'<sup>4</sup>, authorised by the suitably reconstituted spirit of Shakespeare, miraculously possessed of foresight and hindsight, bears the unmistakeable traces of a social morality and a poetic practice saturated in ideology, caught in the process of effacing the conditions of their historical production.

This use of Shakespeare as a means of locating 'sameness' is a part of a general process to which Bertold Brecht objected in his *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, where he advocated a redefinition of theatrical practice in 'historically relative terms'. His argument is of direct relevance to a play such as *The Merchant of Venice* in which complex and problematical historical factors are often filtered out through the cognate processes of reading and theatrical representation; indeed, what he demanded of the analysis and representation of social structures in general is a *fortiori* true of the critical mediation of literary productions of the past. Brecht insists that:

'...we must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own, which then acquire from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words, of permanence pure and simple. Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent too.'<sup>5</sup>

This emphasis upon historical 'process' and 'change', this regarding 'of nothing as existing except insofar as it changes, in other words, is in disharmony with itself'<sup>6</sup>, directs our attention away from questions of aesthetic coherence,

---

4.-(Ibid., p. 354).

5.-J. Willet, ed., *Brecht on Theatre* (London, 1977), p. 190.

6.-(Ibid., p. 193).

and of the finished work as the proper object of an allegedly disinterested critical contemplation, and towards the historically specific conditions of its production and its subsequent reception, conditions inscribed within a dialectic of **difference** which only a politically involved and theoretically aware reading can properly recover. To locate 'change' in the past is to affirm the possibility of change in the present, and to detect that process working imaginatively through the tensions, structural discontinuities, and contradictions negotiated through any text, is to observe the manner in which such change might be articulated, perceived, and possibly secured. It goes without saying, of course, that a resistance to the recognition of that process is no less political in its determination to establish 'sameness', continuity, or the primacy of 'ideas' over material cultural practice, though its politics, divested of a theoretical rigour are invariably displaced onto the object of its enquiry.

## II

In his book *The Stranger in Shakespeare*, Leslie Fiedler argues that Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is, 'undeniably, among other things, a play about a Jew'<sup>7</sup>. He suggests, in line with a number of other commentators, that the occasion of the play may have been the scandal of Elizabeth I's Portuguese Jewish physician, Roderigo Lopez, who was executed for treason, and this incident was still in the minds of theatre audiences who, 'having scarcely any other Jews on whom to vent their wrath, demanded on stage symbolic scapegoats'<sup>8</sup>. In addition Fiedler locates a further tension in *The Merchant of Venice* arising out of the conflict between Judaism and Christianity, whereby figures such as Antonio represent those 'Christian sons, who, in seeking to destroy Judaism, have turned against the father of Jews and Christians alike, the patriarch Abraham'<sup>9</sup>. Fiedler's argument proceeds from there to the proposition that the play embodies a range of 'myths' and 'archetypes' within whose framework the fate of a figure such as Shylock represents 'an attempt to translate into mythological form the dogmatic compromise by which Christianity managed to make the New Testament its Scripture without surrendering the Old, and in the course of doing so, worked out ways of regarding the Jews simultaneously as the ultimate enemy, the killers of Christ, and the chosen people, with whom God made the covenant, the bond (this is the meaning of "testament"), under which all who believe in Jesus as the Christ are saved.'<sup>10</sup> A little later in a provocative comment in his chapter on *Othello*, Fiedler goes on to argue, in relation to the maid Emilia's defence of female infidelity as 'woman's sole weapon in what she takes to be

---

7.-L. Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (London, 1973), p. 86.

8.-(*Ibidem*).

9.-(*Ibid.*, p. 111).

10.-(*Ibid.*, pp. 117-18).

the endless battle of the sexes'<sup>11</sup>, that 'Exploited outsiders tend to resemble each other strangely, so that women and Jews fall together not only in Shakespeare but in the imagination of the Western world as a whole.'<sup>12</sup>

Fiedler's general approach, which moves swiftly from the demands of 'history' to those of 'myth', finally falls prey to precisely that 'operational movement' whereby, as Roland Barthes observed, concrete social relations emerge through the process of mythologizing as 'a harmonious display of essences.'<sup>13</sup> Thus Fiedler's elevation of the historically specific concerns of a play such as *The Merchant of Venice* to the level of 'myth' enacts a process of essentializing which Barthes argues 'embodies a defaulting' upon the representation of 'the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world'<sup>14</sup>. A more rigorous account of the general problem to which Fiedler's intriguing argument alludes, might begin with Adorno and Horkheimer's 'Elements of anti-Semitism' in which they describe 'the religious origin' of modern anti-Semitism in terms of a dialectical encounter between 'Father' and 'Son': 'The adherents of the religion of the Father are hated by those who support the religion of the Son -hated as those who know better. It is the hostility to spirit of the spirit, grown obdurate in the conviction of salvation'<sup>15</sup>. 'It needs to be born in mind, however, that their concern is with 'Bourgeois anti-Semitism' to which impulse they ascribe 'a specific economic reason: the concealment of domination in production'<sup>16</sup>, and which is the result of an ideological displacement of the economic injustices arising out of extant socio-economic relations onto a particular group who are then made 'the scapegoats not only for individual manoeuvres and machinations, but in a broader sense, inasmuch as the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to them'<sup>17</sup>. 'For Adorno and Horkheimer the Jews have been historically 'objects, at the mercy of others', for whom 'Commerce was not their vocation but their fate.'<sup>18</sup> Indeed, their very existence, it is argued, constitutes:

'...the trauma of the knights of industry who had to pretend to be creative, while the claptrap of anti-Semitism announced a fact for which they secretly despised themselves; their anti-Semitism is self-hatred, the bad conscience of the parasite.'<sup>19</sup>

---

11.-(Ibid., p. 166).

12.-(Ibid., p. 167).

13.-Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London, 1973), p. 142.

14.-(Ibid., 143).

15.-T. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London, 1979), p. 179.

16.-(Ibid., p. 173).

17.-(Ibid., p. 174).

18.-(Ibid., p. 175).

19.-(Ibid., pp. 175-6).

Clearly, this argument cannot as it stands be applied directly to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, although it provides a suggestive framework for a discussion of the history of the play's theatrical representation and critical reception. What it seeks to unmask, however, is a constitutive social relation which is presented ideologically in terms of a religious difference, although because of its inscription within the framework of capitalism it can be used directly to disclose an underlying set of economic relations. Put simply, it would mean that all of the social institutions which are represented in the play can be read off as straightforward reflections of the economic relationship between Christian and Jew, where the latter comes to embody in displaced form a division within the bourgeois human subject. That 'self-hatred' and 'bad conscience' to which Adorno and Horkheimer refer in general, may be detected in the manner in which the figure of Shylock has been alternately vilified and 'humanized' in theatrical performance from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, to the point where a critic such as John Russell Brown can assert with approval that, 'In the theatre it is his play.'<sup>20</sup> It is precisely this inadvertent dignifying of the play's manifest anti-Semitism that Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant* (1977) seeks to redress.

Perry Anderson has recently reminded us, however, of a vitally important distinction which requires to be made between capitalist and pre-capitalist social formations; he argues that in the case of the latter it is, in principle, impossible to read off directly its institutions from its economic relations and vice versa:

The "superstructures" of kinship, religion, law or the state necessarily enter into the constitutive structure of the mode of production in pre-capitalist social formations. They intervene directly in the "internal" nexus of surplus-extraction, where in capitalist social formations, the first in history to separate the economy as a formally self-contained order, they provide by contrast its "external" preconditions. In consequence, pre-capitalist modes of production cannot be defined except via the political, legal and ideological superstructures, since these are what determines the type of extra-economic coercion that specifies them. The precise forms of juridical dependence, property and sovereignty that characterize a pre-capitalist social formation, far from being merely accessory or contingent epiphenomena, compose on the contrary the central indices of the determinate mode of production dominant within it.<sup>21</sup>

---

20.-John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (London, 1966), p. 71.

21.-Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1979), p. 403-4.

Indeed, to take Anderson's argument a stage further, we may say that the social institutions he identifies, realized discursively, 'in-form' political interests and the disposition of power within the pre-capitalist social formation, and in a very crucial sense may be said to constitute it. In a manner not unlike the definition of the 'author' advocated by Foucault, authority in the socio-political sense here, 'points to the existence of certain types of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture'<sup>22</sup>, and is therefore not reducible to a set of unchanging economic coordinates.

The position is complicated in relation to *The Merchant of Venice* because this is a play which, as many commentators have recognized, appears to confront economic questions directly. Some forty years ago E.C. Pettet observed that the play 'contains one of Shakespeare's rare considerations of a major socio-economic problem of his time', that of usury<sup>23</sup>; although in what is arguably the best materialist account of *The Merchant of Venice* to date, Walter Cohen has pointed out that the bond between Antonio and Shylock is not usurious in the strict sense of the term at all<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, Cohen goes on to suggest that the play's conflict is 'a special instance of the struggle, widespread in Europe, between Jewish quasi-feudal fiscalism and native bourgeois mercantilism, in which the indigenous forces usually prevailed', and in this context Shylock is conceived as, 'an old man with obsolete values trying to arrest the course of history.'<sup>25</sup> Cohen's argument, quite different from Pettet's, or indeed from Tawney's which inscribes the response to a generalized conception of usury within the framework of medieval ideology 'as part of a hierarchy of values, embracing all interests and activities, of which the apex was religion'<sup>26</sup>, derives its emphasis directly from Marx's chapter on 'Pre-capitalist Relations' in *Capital*, vol. III. Here it is argued, 'usury centralizes monetary wealth. It does not change the mode of production, but clings on to it like a parasite and impoverishes it'<sup>27</sup>; thus, Marx continues, 'In place of the old exploiter, whose exploitation was more or less patriarchal, since it was largely a means of political power, we have a hard money-grubbing upstart. But the mode of production remains unaltered'<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, we may deduce from this that although the position accorded to the usurer was clearly on the margins of the social order, the political effect of his activity was symbolically central to its operation, and to its self-definition. For all its alleged conservatism, 'usures's capital' combined with 'mercantile wealth', was, as Marx observes, to 'bring

---

22.-Michel Foucault, *Language Counter-memory, Practice* (Oxford, 1977), p. 123.

23.-E.C. Pettet, *The Merchant of Venice*, Casebooks Series, John Wilder, ed. (London, 1969), p. 100.

24.-Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca and London, 1985), p. 199.

25.-(*Ibid.*, p. 202).

26.-R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harmondsworth, 1938), p. 158.

27.-Karl Marx, *Capital*, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1981), p. 731.

28.-(*Ibidem*).

about the formation of a monetary wealth independent of landed property.<sup>29</sup> For Marx usury is at one and the same time 'conservative, and simply makes the mode of production more wretched'<sup>30</sup>, but it is also potentially subversive in that it helps to erode the very means through which patriarchal power and authority realize themselves fully, landed property. Abstracted from its constitutive context in Shakespeare's play, a 'knowledge' of usury can be produced, but the way in which the issue is handled textually in *The Merchant of Venice* makes it clear that usury is part of a larger discursive terrain within whose boundaries a particular 'reading formation' is inscribed, which brings to bear a determinate range of social, cultural, and aesthetic expectations upon the text.

Viewed from this perspective, the proliferation of treatises on the subject of usury from Luther onwards, takes on a slightly different complexion from its usual designation as 'background' material. For Luther, usury 'lays burdens upon all lands, cities, lords, and people, sucks them dry, and brings them to ruin'<sup>31</sup>, whereas the best and most acceptable form of interest is the 'tithe' because it is linked to agrarian production and is thus variable, depending upon God's intervention on human affairs<sup>32</sup>. These basic themes are taken up by subsequent commentators; for example, Sir Thomas Wilson in his *A Discourse upon Usure* (1572) argues that usury is 'against nature' (\*3v), and then proceeds to outline in some detail the precise manner of its destruction of the entire social fabric:

'The ploughman will nomore turne up the ground for uncertayne gayne, when hee maye make an assured profite on hys money, that lyeth by him. The artificer will leve hys woorkynge. The clothier will cease hys makynge of clothes, because these trades are paynefull and chargeable: yea all men will geve themselves wholie to lyue an idle life by there money, if they haue any... And amongst others, the gentleman will no more professe armes nor chivalrye, to aduance hys welfare, but selling hys landes will haue double gayne by hys moneye, and so ge eue ouer howse kepyn ge all together, takynge a chamber in London or else where in steade of a house in hys owne countrie, as wee see they doe now commonlye, the more is the pitie, and the greater is theire shame, yea the noble man will nomore defend the widowe & fatherless, nor yet do iudgement and iustice, but lyue by hys filthye gayne, and lose thereby hys dignity and estimacion, and all those that doe lyue by corrupt usurye, for none in right should be a knight, yt is a knowen usurer, & such a hurt to his countrie.'<sup>33</sup>

---

29.-(Ibid., pp. 732-3).

30.-(Ibid., p. 745).

31.-Martin Luther, *Works: The Christian in Society* (Walter Brantdt, ed., 4 vols.: Philadelphia, 1962), p. 297.

32.-(Ibid., pp. 309-10).

33.-Thomas Wilson, *A Discourse Upon Usure* (London, 1572), pp. 185-85v).

Those commentators who followed Wilson, such as Philip Caesar (1578), Henry Smith (1591), or Miles Mosse (1595), all articulated their social and political objections to usury through the ideological refraction glass of theology. Thus usury was 'destroyer of nature'<sup>34</sup>, and of 'all humane societie'<sup>35</sup> which rested upon the laws of hierarchy and of Christian charity; moreover, the attempts by usurers themselves to justify their practice is conceived as a form of self-deception analogous to an unruliness associated with the figure of Eve: 'For thei whiche painte their couetousnesse vnder this colour, beeyng deceiued by their domesticall Eve their corrupt Nature whiche was misreable seduced by Sathan, wilfully destroy them selues, and by their owne sophistrie are deceiued.'<sup>36</sup> This revealing image through which usury is made to signify the undermining of domestic patriarchal order by a corrupted 'feminine' impulse, is but a refinement of Wilson's argument which extends, as we have seen, to the whole of society, and to those obligations manifest in public demonstrations of social position, 'dignity and estimacion', through which identity and subjectivity are articulated and realized. That this is rooted in the ideological apparatus of 'religion' is emphasised by Miles Mosse's axiomatic assertion that, 'Mens lawes can onely restraine the outwarde deedes, committed by the members of the bodie: but the lawes of God restraine the euill thoughts, and concepts and intentions of the heart.'<sup>37</sup> And in a metaphor which drives home the connection between the internalization of 'lawe' and the objective social relations it exists to protect, he describes the practice of the usurer as 'such a kinde of husbandman who planteth having no ground, & reapeth having no seede.'<sup>38</sup> Indeed, it is not until 1607 when Francis Bacon proffered a more pragmatic stance that the caricaturing of usurers as those who 'should have orange-tawny bonnets because they do judaize'<sup>39</sup>, could give way to a realistic acceptance of the economic advantages of authorizing and controlling usury, although the demonizing of the figure of the usurer continued in Overbury, and Earle, and in theatrical representation in plays such as *Volpone* (1605), and *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605- 6). Indeed, the conflation of 'Jew', 'usurer' and a perverse patriarchy is present in the mid-fourteenth-century *The Play of the Sacrament*, where four Jewish merchants re-enact symbolically the murder of Christ:

'Yf that thys be he that on Caluery was mad red,  
Onto my mynd, I shall enne yow a conceyt good:  
Surely with owr daggars we shall see on thys bredde,  
And so with clowtys we shall know yf he haue any blood.'<sup>40</sup>

---

34.-M. Phillippus Caesar, *A general Discourse Against The Damnable Sect of Usurie* (London, 1578), sig. A2v).

35.-(*Ibid.*, sig. B2v).

36.-(*Ibid.*, sig. N2v).

37.-Miles Mosse, *The Arraignment and Conviction of Usurie* (London, 1595), p. 69.

38.-(*Ibid.*, p. 80).

39.-Bacon (1962) p. 123.

40.-N. Davis, ed., *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, EETS (London: 1970), p. 72.

In both Jonson's and Middleton's plays, usury is brought into alignment with a transgressive sexuality, as the monstrous patriarch Volpone threatens his victim Celia with a vision of adulterous excess: 'I will meete thee, in as many shapes:/ Where we may, so trans-fuse our wandering soules,/ Out at our lippes, and score up summes of pleasure' (*Volpone*, III.vii. 232-4.); or where the grotesque and drunken figure of Dampit is literally the bibulous and fiscal embodiment of venal excess, the 'damned pit' which is the *terminus ad quem* of all excess, caught in the contradictory process of resisting 'that little pitte Lechery' in the figure of Audrey, while at the same time engaging in the devilish activity of making money breed, which, as Henry Smith observed, is 'a dead thing which hath no seede, and therefore is not fit to ingender.'<sup>41</sup>

The appearance of *The Merchant of Venice* some time during 1596-98 constitutes one of a number of theatrical interventions in what was already a culturally and politically charged discursive terrain, for which there was already in existence a set of determinations controlling the reception of such texts. That discursive terrain, within whose boundaries the debate about usury was a recurrent symptom of crisis, encompassed both the institutions through which the social order was sustained, and also the identity of the individual, gendered human subject inscribed in its structures. It is precisely these ideological materials that Don. E. Wayne describes in his analysis of Ben Jonson's poem 'To Penshurst', when he observes that, by the end of the sixteenth century in England, 'images and values we tend to identify as middle class had already begun to appear in the transformation of the aristocracy's own self-image.'<sup>42</sup> Both Tawney and Pettet have identified the extent to which members of the aristocracy were forced during this period to borrow money to maintain their estates, and Lawrence Stone has argued that because of the aristocratic commitment to 'conspicuous consumption'<sup>43</sup>, in addition to intensive borrowing, Elizabethan noblemen were forced to diversify into 'the alternative fields of industry, mining, and commerce.'<sup>44</sup> It was against such forms of acquisitiveness that, according to Wayne, Jonson's 'To Penshurst' attempted 'to provide a rationale for a normative conception of accumulation'<sup>45</sup>, in which the Sidneys are seen as the custodians of 'Nature' whose abundance is 'a sign of the Sidneys' natural right to their domain'<sup>46</sup>. And yet, of course, the operations of that 'Nature' are deeply aligned with precisely those ideological means whereby potentially subversive forces are contained:

---

41.-Henry Smith, *The Examination of Usury in Two Sermons* (London, 1591), pp. 16-17.

42.-Don E. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and The Poetics of History* (London, 1984), p. 25.

43.-Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy: 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965), p. 184 & p. 335.

44.-(*Ibid.*, p. 380).

45.-Don E. Wayne (Op. cit., p. 121).

46.-(*Ibid.*, p. 124).

The lady's noble, fruitful, chaste withal.  
 His children thy great lord may call his own:  
 A fortune in this age but rarely known.  
 They are, and have been taught religion: thence  
 Their gentler spirits have sucked innocence.  
 Each morn, and even, they are taught to pray,  
 With the whole household, and may, every day,  
 Read in their virtuous parents' noble parts,  
 The mysteries of manners, arms, and arts.'<sup>47</sup>

The contiguity of the concepts of natural abundance, domestic order, and patriarchal control, inscribed within a thoroughly mystified process of material accumulation, is anticipated, in certain crucial respects, by those contradictions evident in the position of divines such as Henry Smith, who could explicitly decry the acquisitiveness associated with usury as the activity of 'non-residents, that is, such bad members, that no man speaketh for them but themselves'<sup>48</sup>, while at the same time, in his sermon 'A Preparative to Marriage' (1592), formulating a fundamentally political account of marriage as the basis of an ordered 'Commonweale'<sup>49</sup>.

The displacements and transferences that we observe taking place here constitute the process whereby a **political** unconscious in-forms the field of discourse of which *The Merchant of Venice* is part. But we must remember that artistic representation, as Balibar and Macherey have observed, does not display 'the 'original' bare discourse of these ideological positions, as they were 'before' their 'literary' realizations for these ideological positions can only be formed in the materiality of the literary text.'<sup>50</sup> The constraints of genre, in this case that of comic form, provides therefore a sequence of 'imaginary' contradictions which, according to Balibar and Machery, are 'soluble within the ideological practice of religion, politics, morality, aesthetics and psychology'<sup>51</sup>, all of which do not, it should be emphasised, point to some hidden 'meaning' in the text, but rather to those conditions that produce meanings. Thus, a reading of *The Merchant of Venice* of the sort that I am proposing would concern itself not with the straightforward reception of an abstracted aesthetic experience, much less with the direct experience of the dramatic characters themselves, but with the discursive configurations of economics, romantic love, patriarchy, and gender ideology insofar as they are constitutive of the displayed ideological materials of the dramatic text itself.

---

47.-Ben Jonson, *The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: George Parfitt, ed., 1980), pp. 97-8.

48.-Henry Smith, *The Examination of Usury in Two Sermons* (London, 1591), p. 34.

49.-Henry Smith, *The Sermons of Master H. Smith* (London, 1592), p. 42.

50.-E. Balibar & P. Macherey, 'On Literature as an Ideological Form', in *Untying the Text*, edited by R. Young (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 88.

51.-(*Ibidem*).

### III

In a provocative essay on *The Merchant of Venice*, W.H. Auden detected a series of disharmonies in the play. He characterized Shylock as a marginalized figure, and a threat to the order of Venice: 'a professional usurer who, like a prostitute, has a social function but is an outcast from the community.'<sup>52</sup> He saw this fundamental division echoed first in the character of Antonio, excluded from the pattern of marriage relationships at the end of the play because, 'though his conduct may be chaste (it) is concentrated upon a member of his own sex'<sup>53</sup>, and finally in the opposition between Venice and Belmont which although they are related spheres of activity, 'their existences are not compatible with each other.'<sup>54</sup> This division in the play operates both at an external level in the opposition between 'Christian' and 'Jew', and at an internal level in the self-division of individual characters although in the latter case the hidden motivation may not be quite as Auden believed.

To take the external division between 'Christian' and 'Jew' first: ostensibly this would appear to be a straightforward conflict between two mutually hostile cultures, expressed in terms of religious and economic difference. To this extent Shylock may be said to represent both a challenge to the ethos of Venice, while at the same time providing the differential means through which that ethos achieves its own self-definition. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said has referred to this process as, 'a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony.'<sup>55</sup> But what Said has identified as an opposition between Occident and Orient, with the latter occupying the position of an 'underground' or illegitimate version of the dominant power in a colonialist context, can also be used to locate the differential mechanisms through which priorities and boundaries are established internally. In *The Play of the Sacrament* the Renaissance perception of the Jew as 'outsider' is reinforced by the appeal to 'Mahomet', while in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* Barabas allies himself with the 'Moor' Ithamore: 'Make account of me/ As of thy fellow; we are villains both:/ Both circumcised, we hate Christians both.' (II.iii. 215-17). In Marlowe's play 'religion' is, from the very outset, thoroughly demystified as the means whereby political domination is secured. But although Ferneze's concluding exhortation: 'So, march away, and let due praise be given/ Neither to fate nor fortune, but to heaven' (V.v. 122-3), exposes religion as an ideological weapon of subjection, Barabas who has destroyed his own family, and who is finally accused of 'treason', is recuperated for the disciplinary

---

52.-W.H.Auden, *The Dyer's Hand & Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 227.

53.-(Ibid., p. 231).

54.-(Ibid., p. 234).

55.-W. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 5.

economy of Christianity in his ceremonial accession to his own, literally hellish, punishment: 'But now begins the extremity of heat/ To pinch me with intolerable pangs' (V.v. 86-7). But it is vitally important to remember that, though formulated as an external conflict between 'Christian' and 'Jew', many of the objections to usury levelled by English commentators were against Christians who practised it: 'I do not knowe', lamented Sir Thomas Wilson, 'any place in Chistendome, so much suiet to thys synne of usurie, as the whole realme of Englande ys at thys present, and hathe bene of late yeres.'<sup>56</sup>

Jonathan Dollimore has recently reminded us how in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* 'Faustus violates Christianity in the name and image of Christ'<sup>57</sup>, and in so doing demonstrates how repressed energies return, 'via the very images, structures, and mechanisms of repression itself'<sup>58</sup>. At one level, of course, it would appear that the questions raised by a challenge issued to the dominant order can therefore be easily answered on the latter's own terms. But, as Dollimore goes on to argue, this imitation of 'the dominant from below' results in a 'transgressive mimesis' whereby the repressed, 'even as it imitates, reproducing itself in terms of its exclusion, also demystifies, producing a knowledge of the dominant which excludes it, this being a knowledge which the dominant has to suppress in order to dominate'<sup>59</sup>. Michel Pecheux articulates this problem in terms of an opposition between the 'good subject', who adopts a position in which his/her subjection is 'freely consented to'<sup>60</sup>, and the 'bad subject' who takes up a position of 'separation (distantiation, doubt, interrogation, challenge, revolt...)' in relation to the reality to which s/he is expected to give consent; the result is, 'a struggle against ideological evidentness on the terrain of that evidentness, an evidentness with a negative sign, reversed in its own terrain'<sup>61</sup>. Thus the 'bad subject' is involved in a counter-identification with the dominant discourse through which a resistance to its ideological imperatives is made possible.

The first appearance of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* occasions a dispute which hinges upon the interpretation of Scripture. This dispute is carefully contextualized as the moment of Shylock's acceptance of Antonio's 'bond' is juxtaposed against his refusal of Bassanio's invitation to dine with them: 'I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following: but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you' (I.iii. 30-33). Shylock's rejection of these related rituals represent a rejection of courtesies which are, for the Venetians, not contingent to their economic

---

56.-Wilson, op. cit. (1572), sig. D4r.

57.-Jonathan Dollimore, 'Subjectivity, Sexuality and Transgression: The Jacobean Connection', *Renaissance Drama*, N.S. XVII, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Evaston, 1986), p. 59.

58.-(*Ibidem*).

59.-(*Ibid.*, p. 61).

60.-Michel Pecheux, *Language, Semantics, Ideology* (London, 1995), pp. 156-7.

61.-(*Ibid.*, p. 157).

practice, but constitutive of it, and this refusal serves to sharpen the distinction between the 'friendship' between Antonio and Bassanio: 'My purse, my person, my extremest means/ Lie all unlock'd to your occasion' (I.i. 138-9), and Shylock's objections to Antonio because, 'He lends out money gratis, and brings down/ The rate of usance here with us in Venice' (I.iii. 39-40). This distinction, represented here both ideologically and aesthetically, is brought to focus upon the hermeneutical question of alternative readings of Scripture, where what is at issue is two competing social practices both of which derive their authorities from two distinct ideologies. Shylock invokes the Old Testament episode of Jacob's contract with Laban as the scriptural authority through which his own socio-economic practice receives its legitimation; Antonio, committed to a providential account of accumulation attributes the story of Jacob's success to divine intervention: 'A thing not in his power to bring to pass/ But sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven.' (I.iii.87-8).

Two strands surface in this exchange which, at this point, are effectively conflated, and aligned generically with the structural device of the comic 'obstacle'. Shylock's identification of his own practice with Laban's ingenuity in seeking to control 'Nature' gestures towards a subversive humanism which the play later develops, and which a number of modern commentators have attempted to identify as an authentic 'voice'. Secondly, the secularisation of 'Nature' has the effect of reconstituting its hitherto mystified independent operation, as a contingency of a determinate human history. Shylock, therefore, as a 'type' of Laban, by analogy seeks that patriarchal control over Venetian life which will effectively transform its social institutions. Curiously, usury is represented here paradoxically as the product of a superseded theology -Shylock will later refuse to yield 'To Christian intercessors' (III.iii. 16)- and as the harbinger of an emergent force which seeks to challenge the 'natural' order. We cannot say here, categorically, that Shylock represents a wholly 'conservative' impulse, irrespective of Marx's perception that usury did no more than exacerbate the extant relations which obtained in a pre-capitalist social formation. Rather, the threat which the figure of Shylock represents is a product of ideology, which is mediated aesthetically as a negative, demonized force, equivalent in its embryonic urgency to other challenges which threaten the harmony of Venice's Christian patriarchal order. Thus, what is often read as sympathy for Shylock is, in fact, the play's ideological justification for its own anti-Semitic stance. Here an embryonic humanism is offered as a crucial element in Shylock's own self-definition, and it receives its rational authority from the letter of the Old Testament writing. Ultimately this combination will prove to be Shylock's own undoing, and will be the structural means whereby he will enter coercively the order of Venice, reconstituted as the Christian patriarch with all of the social, personal, domestic, and political obligations that entails.

From the very outset Christian 'authority' seeks to supplant that Old Testament patriarchy upon whose commercial practice it is forced to depend, by its demonizing of Judaism as the practice of the 'bad subject':

'Mark you this Bassanio,  
The devil can cite scripture for his purpose,-  
An evil soul producing holy witness  
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,  
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.  
O what a goodly outside, falsehood hath!'

(I.iii.92-7)

The vehemence of Antonio's response to Shylock's Semitic identity both here and throughout the play is one of its mosts disturbing features. The initial image he produces, augmented with a cumulative rhetorical force, is that of the infernal patriarch whose very existence constitutes a challenge to the ideological heartland of Venetian social practice, predicated as it is upon a relation of blind faith. That in the play Shylock is given a 'family' of his own, that its own internal inter-personal, psychic, and emotional relations are directly represented, and that it is shown to be a divided unit: 'My own flesh and blood to rebel' (III.i. 31), articulates in dramatic terms precisely that 'transgressive mimesis' which demystifies even as it imitates, and which is positioned in Venetian discourse as a demonic form, a challenge from below, a 'family' in the devil's name, so to speak.

Shylock's defence of usury follows immediately upon the scene between Portia and Nerissa, set in Belmont. Here the emphasis is upon the constraint of personal freedom as Portia is bound by the dictates of patriarchal 'law'; but it is clear that this prescriptive restraint is a rational response to the subversive potential of the irrational 'blood' which is given here an explicitly gender-specific location:

'I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching: the brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree,- such a hare is madness the youth to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple; but this reasoning is not in the habit to choose me a husband,- O me the word "choose"! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the law of a dead father: is it not hard Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?'

(I.ii. 18-26)

Portia is caught in a double-blind, accepting the rationale for control, but agonizing over the uncertainty of its consequences; the whole issue is handled more circumspectly in the case of Jessica where some justification for her rebellion is cautiously provided, but where the emotional effects upon her 'father', though contextualized negatively, imitate the frustrations consequent upon the loss of patriarchal authority. Nerissa's response to Portia's question illuminates for us the significance of the episode with the caskets as one involving the choice of one from a determinate number of 'meanings'- a domestic gender- specific analogue of the discussion between Antonio and Shylock in the following scene- which reinforces the patriarchal notion of authority that prevails throughout the play; Nerissa responds:

'Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations,- therefore the lott'ry that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly, but one which you shall rightly love.'

(I.ii. 27-32)

In both cases the challenge to the dominant patriarchal order from below, characterized in Portia's case as a rebellion of the (female) 'blood', and in Shylock's case literally as a rebellion of his 'own flesh and blood', which Salanio mocks as Judaic excess: 'Out upon it old carrion! rebels it at these years?' (III.i. 32), threatens a division in the ideology of patriarchy.

What characterizes Shylock's practice is the repression of his 'flesh and blood' which the mocking Solanio prizes from his hermeneutical possession: 'There is more difference between thy flesh and hers, than between jet and ivory...' (III.i.34-5). Moreover what is now an infernally hermaphroditic Shylock, who is both 'the dam' and the devilish instrument through which Jessica will, 'if the devil may be her judge' (III.i. 30), receive her damnation, is also puritanically anti-festive in his disposition, a combination which marginalizes him theologically and historically as the protean embodiment of all that is symbolically central to the play's dominant ideology. In what is the first of a sequence of counter-identifications with the play's dominant discourses, Shylock reverses his earlier resolve not to dine with Bassanio and his friends, going 'in hate, to feed upon/ The prodigal Christian.' (II.vi. 14-15). Moreover, his exhortation to Jessica to 'stop my houses's ears, I mean my casements,/ Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter/ my sober house' (II.v. 34-6), augments that initial counter-identification with a refusal to acknowledge that productive excess through which contractual obligations are celebrated in Venice. Significantly, as Portia in disguise points out in court: 'This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood' (IV.i. 302). By contrast, Venetian law, and the gendered human subjects inscribed within its discourses acknowledge openly the

connection between 'blood' and 'life', both literally, and, in Portia's case, symbolically at the place where gender ideology divides human subjects according to their dispositions to 'passion' or to 'reason'. Moreover, Portia's cross-dressing underlines the masculine patriarchal constraints within those boundaries that symbolic division is generated, and to which her own female sexuality presents a threat. In Shylock's case it is precisely the failure of patriarchal constraint embodied in Jessica's rebellion, which elicits directly a commitment to 'passion' articulated through the appropriation of the terms of a Christian humanism for a project which inverts its customary judicial practice:

'I am a Jew, hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? - if you prick us do we not bleed? if you tickle us do we not laugh? if you poison us do we not die? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge? - if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? - why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.'

III.i.52-66)

In what is a superb example of resistance through counter-identification, Shylock's alignment here with an emergent humanism imitates the Christian values of Venetian patriarchy at the same time as it refuses to internalize them. If, as C.L. Barber has perceptively observed, Shylock 'can be a drastic ironist because he carries to extremes what is present, whether acknowledged or not', the values of a 'silken' Venetian world,<sup>62</sup> then it has to be said that the irony is double-edged.

What draws Portia and Shylock together as particular foci of resistance is that they are both possessed of material wealth. What distinguishes them from each other in structural terms is that while in Portia's case the institution already exists for making that wealth available and constitutes a legitimate form of capital accumulation expressed as the sanctified means of social revitalization, the stark necessity of Shylock's role in Venetian economic life can only be expressed negatively. Because he is engaged in an 'unnatural' and therefore un-Christian practice, the sterile activity of making money breed, Venice can only admit him symbolically as a demonization of its own social and economic practice, or coercively as a converted Christian, a reconstituted

---

62.-C.L.Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (New York, 1959), p. 179.

subject who can then play a full patriarchal role in its affairs, financing both his daughter's marriage, and replenishing the coffers of the state. To this extent the play historicizes a key element of the genre, the obstructive father, by effecting what is actually a problematic transformation of its content. Shylock, we should recall, after being forced to accept Christian values, asks leave to depart the court: 'I pray you give me leave to go from hence,/ I am not well' (IV.i. 391-2).

#### IV

This moment marks the entry of Shylock into the Christian state, a process which enacts through its deployment of the metaphor of death and re-birth the history of Christianity itself:

'You take my house, when you do take the prop  
That doth sustain my house: you take my life  
When you do take the means whereby I live.'

(IV.i. 371-3)

He is, however, coerced into Christian patriarchy on the grounds that, as Machiavelli observed: 'every religion has the basis of its life rooted in some one of its main institutions', and that this inculcates the belief that 'the god who can predict your future, be it good or evil, could also bring it about'<sup>63</sup>. Significantly, part of Shylock's accumulated wealth is to pass on his death, 'Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter' (IV.i. 386), betokening a shift from what Freud called 'the religion of the father' to 'a religion of the son'<sup>64</sup>. It is only to this extent that it is possible to see Shylock as Walter Cohen sees him: 'a figure from the past-medieval, marginal, diabolical, irrational, anarchic.'<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the 'discontent' that Shylock feels as a consequence of his re-birth is not so much the result of his internalization of a primal oedipal drama, as a registering of that political repression upon which a form of national unity is predicated. Here a form of anarchy, positioned in the play's dominant discourse as a 'damned' patriarchy is repressed through the very mechanisms of sacrifice and salvation upon whose structures and images its ideologically dominant 'other' is founded; thus Shylock's 'transgressive mimesis' turns out to be the means whereby Venice recognizes itself and experiences, as Foucault would say, 'its positive truth in its downward fall'<sup>66</sup>. That process posits, however, a split subject, forced to live

---

63.-Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 143.

64.-Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 12 (Harmondsworth, 1985).

-Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Religion*, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 13, (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 332.

65.-Cohen (op. cit.), p. 202.

66.-Michel Foucault (op. cit.) p. 34.

in the world, but counselled to disregard worldly practice; forced to accept a normative ethic of wealth accumulation whose operations are attributed to the determining force of a divinely motivated 'Nature', but committed by practical desire to secular intervention. Shylock's 'illness' is the direct consequence of his entry into what is now a deeply fissured Christian patriarchy. To this extent Shylock is the recipient of an anti-Semitic 'hatred of Christians', as Freud puts it<sup>67</sup>, a form of self-hatred which can only be expressed in terms of a mechanism of displacement.

If Shylock's 'illness' is the condition of his entry into the patriarchal order of Venice, then Antonio's 'sadness' is a condition of his existence within it. The homily 'Of the Miseries of Man' counsels the open confession of 'our state of imperfection'<sup>68</sup>, and ends with the exhortation: 'In the meane season, yea and at all times, let us learne to know our selves, our frailtie and weaknesse without any craking or boasting of our owne good deedes and merrites.'<sup>69</sup> Antonio, we may recall, is committed to the conscious acceptance of a causal link between professional success and divine providence, where the latter's operations are articulated as the 'risk' that the Christian merchant must always undertake. Antonio suffers also from a 'sadness' which is inexplicable: 'And such a want-wit sadness makes of me, / That I have much ado to know myself' (I.i. 6-7), with the result that his 'experience' is detached from the 'wit' which might interpret it, thus producing a crisis of identity.

Criticism has generally followed Auden in accepting that Antonio's 'sadness' is the consequence of frustrated homosexual desire for Bassanio, as though in the play categories such as 'masculine' and 'feminine' are not culturally produced, but are essences. Thus, Marilyn French can suggest that in this instance, 'erotic love of man for man is repudiated because it cannot breed naturally.'<sup>70</sup> If the problem revolves around Antonio's 'friendship' with Bassanio, then it is important to understand what that relationship actually involves. Here friendship is deeply implicated in the process of accumulation and distribution of wealth whose operations are circumscribed by 'Nature' as the force which ultimately determines human success or failure. Bassanio wishes to accumulate wealth through marriage to Portia:

---

67.-(Ibid., p. 336).

68.-Homilies, *The Book of Homilies* (London, 159sig., B3v).

69.-(ibid., sig. B6v).

70.-Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* (London: 1982), p. 114.

'if you please  
To shoot another arrow that self way  
Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,  
(As I will watch the aim) or to find both,  
Or bring your latter hazard back again,  
And thankfully rest debtor for the first.'

(I.i. 147-52)

but in other to do so, and because he lacks the means, he must 'get clear of all the debts I owe.' (I.i. 134). Antonio, for his part, makes Bassanio's continued public esteem, his 'honour', the condition upon which he will place his substance: 'my purse, my person, my extremest means' (I.i. 138), at his friend's disposal. Antonio's 'purse' is his 'person', he exists in Venice as a benevolent patriarch to facilitate the circulation of wealth, not as possession, which is what Shylock does: 'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!' (II.viii. 15), but as an extension of Venetian social relations, Shylock's 'Christian cur'sy' (III.i. 44), which many contemporary writers believed to be under threat from usurious practice.

And yet, even though Antonio takes all human precautions against the vicissitudes of 'Nature':

'My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,  
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate  
Upon the fortune of this present year:  
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.'

(I.i. 42-5)

there is a sense in which the discourse within whose boundaries he is interpellated as a human subject cannot admit directly to the need for money credit as a safeguard against failure. What Portia is later made to feel as a consequence of patriarchal constraint, Antonio anticipates as an experience which is unaccountably in excess of his own capacity to interpret. That 'excess' which directs us to the real mechanisms of accumulation enters the dominant discursive formation of Venice transformed as the bond between man and man, and man and woman, where the two are not conflictual but complementary. Departure from that complex discursive formation of 'Christian cur'sy' can only be admitted in textualized form as a demonic force. Shylock therefore comes to occupy the space in which Christian patriarchy seeks to efface, through ideology, the contradictions in its own practices of wealth accumulation; as Fernand Braudel observes of the Jews in the Renaissance generally, 'if they had not existed, it would surely have been necessary to invent them.'<sup>71</sup> But

---

71.-Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th-18th Centuries*, 3 vols. (London, 1982), p. 166.

although Shylock is constructed within the parameters of a familiar, 'medieval' satanic discourse, his very presence signals the presence of a practical need which cannot be openly acknowledged without radically transforming Christian patriarchal ideology altogether. In this way commercial practice, which is never represented discursively as just a commercial practice, is forced to repress, not homosexual desire, but the reality of its own operations in the world. The result is precisely that 'estrangement', or loss of identity which Marx has identified in the 'Christian state' which has yet to become fully secularized:

'In the so-called Christian state it is estrangement (Entfremdung) which carries weight, and not man himself. The only man who carries weight, the king, is specifically distinct from other men: he is still religious and is in direct communion with heaven, with God. The relationships which prevail are still relationships of faith. This means that the religious spirit is not yet truly secularized.'<sup>72</sup>

There are no monarchs in *The Merchant of Venice* but this is the 'state' which the appropriately masculinized Portia invokes when she lectures Shylock on 'mercy'; here in the most ironical of contexts, a Christian 'mimesis' is proposed that will supersede the dependency upon the letter of the Law which the transgressive mimetic Shylock invokes to protect his interests:

'It blesseth him that gives and him that takes,  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown.  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute of law and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings:  
But mercy is above the sceptred sway,  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute of God himself;  
And earthly power doth show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice.'

(IV.i. 183-93)

From the outset, therefore, Antonio's 'sadness' and his lack of self-knowledge are, to a very considerable extent, the subject of *The Merchant of Venice* although the play cannot speak its concerns directly except in terms of an intolerant, deeply nationalistic fear.

---

72.-Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: 1977), p. 225.

Shylock's marginal position in the play, and final recuperation of his subversive energy for the dominant discourse of Christian patriarchy, presents what was, for Elizabethan society, an 'insurmountable contradiction'<sup>73</sup>. This contradiction, involving Christian participation in usurious practice receives its inscription in *The Merchant of Venice* in the form of what Macherey and Balibar would call, 'a special language, a language of 'compromise', realizing in advance the fiction of a forthcoming conciliation.'<sup>74</sup> That conciliation is achieved aesthetically through the presentation of Belmont in the play as Venice saviour; or to put the matter a little more tendentiously, what happens in Belmont ultimately determines the continuation of a Christian patriarchy whose normative conception of wealth accumulation is textualized as the pursuit of an 'ideal'. This, however, raises a problem since what is 'ideal' in the play is forced into a relationship of determinacy with the 'real' which it can only recognize in terms of a mystification of material social and economic practice. Bassanio's success in winning Portia guarantees racial purity and opposes an essential moral worth against worldly show; but the process is itself contradictory, since 'the gifts of rich value' (II.ix. 91) that he deploys are part of a rhetoric of persuasion which he later denies in his choice between 'caskets' and 'meanings':

'In religion  
What damned error but some sober brow  
Will bless it and approve it with a text,  
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?  
There is no vice so simple, but assumes  
Some mark of virtue on his outward parts'

(III.ii. 77-82)

It is not surprising, therefore, that Bassanio should deny the representational value of 'gold' and 'silver': 'The seeming truth which cunning times put on/ To entrap the wisest' (III.ii. 100-101), and, 'thou pale and common drudge/ 'Tween man and man' (III.ii. 103-4). Here, in the form of a game, is an attempt to construct a 'centre', a 'meaning', but also a recognition that it can never be, as Derrida puts it, 'absolutely present outside a system of differences.'<sup>75</sup>

The object of Bassanio's quest is herself a 'meaning' inscribed within the laws of Christian patriarchy and Venetian mercantile practice, but presented as

73.-E.Balibar & P.Macherey (op. cit), p. 88.

74.-(Ibidem).

75.-Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London, 1981), p. 280.

a 'knowledge' secreted at the heart of the linguistic sign. Fixed thus ideologically, it is significant that while Bassanio chooses, Portia articulates in an 'aside' those very feelings of 'excess' which it is the function of the law of her dead father to constrain:

'O love be moderate, allay thy ecstasy,  
In measure rain thy joy, scant this excess!  
I feel too much thy blessing, make it less  
For fear I surfeit.'

(III.ii. 111-14)

Portia's 'fear' here is, surely, the patriarchal fear of 'excess' internalized by the female subject as part of the mechanism of social and emotional regulation. To this extent both Portia, and her more unruly counterpart Jessica, are central to an understanding of the normative practices of Christian patriarchy.

Of the two it is Jessica who represents the greater threat in that unlike Portia and Nerissa who disguise themselves as men in order to reinforce the very law that holds them in position as gendered subjects, her cross-dressing is an act of usurpation of patriarchal authority. Jessica's systematic undoing of the network of domestic power relations is both a challenge and an enabling strategy in that it contributes to the Christianizing of Shylock, but at the same time aligns him momentarily with the very emotional structures of the order of which his own example is a 'transgressive mimesis':

'Out upon her! thou torturest me Tubal,- it was my  
Turquoise, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor:  
I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.'

(III.i. 110-12)

In the following scene however, Portia recuperates Shylock's domestic ritual for an act of Christian betrothal, one which simultaneously asserts both her social superiority and her gender inferiority as she yields to Bassanio's masculine authority. Here, unlike in Jessica's case, patriarchal authority passes through the willing female subject from father to husband:

'Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours  
Is now converted. But now I was the lord  
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
Queen o'er myself: and even now, but now,  
This house, these servants, and this same myself  
Are yours,- my lord's!- I give them with this ring,

Which when you part from, lose, or give away,  
Let it presage the ruin of your love,  
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.'

(III.ii. 166-74)

If the power which this gives Bassanio is considerable: 'But when this ring/ Parts from the finger, then let life part from hence' (III.ii. 183-4), it is also conditional. But the threat of female power which it contains is very carefully circumscribed by the fact that Portia's 'self' is itself a social construct which makes possible her 'conversion' from daughter to wife. By contrast Jessica's status as unruly woman can only be recuperated for the patriarchal order which she threatens to subvert by the 'conversion' -literally- of her father, of whom she is an 'effect'. Here, as elsewhere in this play what appear to be primarily generic features of comedy are made to refract a determinate social history.

It is this trouble and complex history which virtually dictates the transcoding of the 'insurmountable contradictions' involving fiscal 'excess' into the realm of female sexuality where the possibilities of containment seem more promising. It is left to Lorenzo, the Venetian 'son' through whom both Jessica and Shylock are recuperated for Christian patriarchy, to refurbish masculine identity; he does this by articulating a politics which is in effect displaced onto the realm of aesthetics. That which 'gilded' Jessica's subversive enterprise at a purely materialistic level, is now aestheticized as a transcendent ideal: 'look how the floor of heaven/ Is thick with patens of bright gold' (V.i. 58-9). What was earlier for Bassanio, 'The seeming truth which cunning times put on/ To entrap the wisest' (III.ii. 100-1), now becomes, through the pun on 'paten' a necessary alliance between 'wealth' and 'religion', although this ploy can never expunge completely the dubious rhetoric of its construction. Faced with the problem that historical example persistently foregrounds, the text is forced into the re-iteration of a distinction between the material transience of life itself, moralized as Lorenzo's 'this muddy vesture of decay' (V.i.64), and the immortality of the soul whose musical pattern is heaven's inscription in human psychology of a safeguard against political subversion:

'The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not moved with the concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils,  
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,  
And his affections dark as Erebus:  
Let no such man be trusted:- mark the music.'

(V.i. 82-88)

What has intervened in the space between Lorenzo and Jessica's catalogue of dubious 'types' as models of their own action, which opens Act V, and Lorenzo's metaphysical pronouncement is, of course, ideology. Indeed, it is as though having raised an issue for which, as yet, there exists no historical solution, the play is forced onto a terrain for which there already exists a range of formal resolutions underwritten by the dominant ideology of patriarchy.

Thus, at the end of the play, and despite earlier doubts, 'Nature' speaks to Venice, transforming Antonio from his role as 'th' unhappy subject of these quarrels' (V.i. 238) into the happy recipient of 'life' from Portia: 'Sweet Lady, you have given me life and living;/ For here I read for certain that my ships/ Are safely come to road.' (V.i. 286-88). Here 'purse' and 'person', 'life and living', receive their composite inscription within the complementary economies of homo-social and heterosexual friendship in Venice. In this context, Shylock is made to seem not so much an obstacle to the forward march of history, as a postponement of its consequences. Thus neutralized within the joint practices of aesthetics and ideology, the 'fear' which 'excess' generates can be displaced onto an area of difference for which a solution already exists socially and generically. But yet, even here, something of a problem remains. Portia's fulsome confidence: 'Let us go in,/ And charge us there upon inter'gatories,/ And we will answer all things faithfully' (V.i. 297-99), is shown to rest upon the mystification of patriarchal authority and the accumulation of wealth. Displaced onto the axis of gender ideology, the comic positioning of that 'fear' of female/fiscal excess by the husband of Portia's social inferior, Gratiano, fails absolutely to contain the range of competing meanings which it releases, and thus returns the play to its own deeply flawed rhetoric:

'Well, while I live, I'll fear no other thing  
So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.'

(V.i. 306-7)

The venality that the ritualized closure of marriage is designed to contain is shown here submitting to the aristocratic example of Portia and Bassanio. This resolution of the awkwardness inherent in the forsaking of gender roles is however, not simply the reflection of a 'historical reality' so much as an ideological product of it.<sup>76</sup>

This is all the more reason to reject John Russell Brown's defensive suggestion that we should merely submit ourselves to the 'experience' of the

---

76.-P. Macherey (1978), p. 129.

play: 'Perhaps when the dance is in progress, it is undesirable to look too closely for a pattern'<sup>77</sup> To abrogate this critical responsibility is to propose a complicity with texts such as *The Merchant of Venice* which lays the critic open to the charge of disseminating its prejudices. To discharge that responsibility is to acknowledge that such prejudices are the products of a determinate history whose solutions can have no permanent claim upon our own historically constituted sensibilities.



---

77.- John Russell Brown, ed., *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* (London, 1962), p. lviii.



## SHAKESPEARE WEEK: A Panel Discussion

Manuela Palacios. Universidad de Santiago.

In November, 1987, Cultural Materialism arrived at the English Department of the University of Santiago de Compostela, a place, like so many English Departments in SPAIN, very much accustomed to formalist literary criticism. Although only Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield are true representatives of Cultural Materialism, both Terence Hawkes and John Drakakis supported and were willing to explain its tenets, and evident differences among the four of them notwithstanding, their overall perspective is similar. This recent approach to culture found both supporters and detractors here: some had already felt doubts as to whether literary criticism was just a matter of counting metaphors in order to arrive at conclusions, others did not like the Marxist slant of this new theory and, finally, more that a few worried about the interference of politics in literature.

Though most of those present in the seminars had been instructed in formalist literary criticism, no one defended the validity of the much abused New Criticism as a proper method of analysis nowadays. We discussed how New Criticism may have been a necessary reaction to the sort of 'hydraulic' criticism which was only interested in looking for all the possible sources of the literary text; its convenience for teaching -- analysing as it did 'the words on the page' -- in a period when the number of students of English increased in a spectacular way was also brought up<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, however, we found it very difficult to escape, as materialists asked us to do, the temptation of believing that there is something essential in the text, some essence that makes it permanent. The only honest approach to literature and the only possible way of getting at the essence, we had been told by formalist critics, was through an objective method and, therefore, the alignment of Cultural Materialism with the political left wing made some reluctant.

Politically conscientious critics are often accused of using the text as a pretext, but is the search for aesthetic effect really objective? To what extent is an aesthetic concern different from a political, religious or moral one? Is the analysis of the author's style a 'neutral' approach to his/her work when one knows that his/her texts and their aesthetic impact are only available to a

---

1.-The latter explanation about the growing student population is adduced by Terry Eagleton in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 50.

privileged, cultured minority? Can we call a critical method objective when it ignores (or seems to) the fact that one rather select portion of the population enjoys classical music, abstract art and metaphysical poetry, while a much larger section only seems to find that widely acclaimed aesthetic effect in Bruce Springsteen, posters or in detective stories? Is formalism objective when, even after acknowledging this division, it opts for the first type of culture and, therefore, perpetuates the schism? Would an unprejudiced formalist analysis of detective stories prove the latter to be second-rate culture?<sup>2</sup>

Let us consider another example:

'My resolution's plac'd, and I have nothing  
Of woman in me; now from head to foot  
I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon  
No planet is of mine.'<sup>3</sup>

After reading these lines taken from Anthony and Cleopatra, one might decide to study hyperbaton, metaphors or neologisms, but as a woman, I am first struck by the idea that women have been considered, and still are, as paradigms of inconstancy and 'lunacy'. Now, which is the 'objective' method, the formalist or the feminist one? If this does not prove to be a very convincing example it might be because, after all, most critics have been men so far.

Nevertheless, it goes without saying that just because we read or listen to lines like those quoted above we cannot conclude that Shakespeare was a misogynist. The reason is not simply that before we decide whether Shakespeare was a misogynist or not, we would first analyse who speaks, under what circumstances, the way those statements are modified throughout the play, what reactions they get from other characters, etc.<sup>4</sup> The point is that Shakespeare's opinions about women are not the most relevant. Both Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield emphasized, over and over again, that they were concerned not so much with Shakespeare's politics as with political Shakespeare, not so much with discovering whether his plays were those of a conservative or a radical, but with the way his plays 'disclose the workings of power', i.e. in this case, the way they not only reflect but also perpetuate some common assumptions about women.

---

2.- These were questions raised at different times during the seminars. We have tried to give them a more or less coherent development by following Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey's article 'On Literature as an Ideological Form', in *Untying the text*, edited by Robert Young (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 79-99.

3.- William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra* (V,ii, 238-241), in the edition by G. Blakemore Evans, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974).

4.- Wayne C. Booth proposes that the critic should consider all these questions before jumping into conclusions about a writer's views 'Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism', *Critical Inquiry*, 9, No. 1 (1982), 59.

One cannot help noticing that transvestism was not only a technical device in Elizabethan drama (the way Portia finds to defend a legal case in *The Merchant of Venice*) but also the only possibility for a Spanish woman of the 19th. Century to attend the Law School, as in the case of Concepcion Arenal<sup>5</sup>: when discussing transvestism, there is often disagreement about whether it really is a subversive reaction or not. John Drakakis differentiated, in his lecture, between Jessica's crossdressing and that of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, and found the former a greater threat and more likely to undermine patriarchal values than the latter. Even when we accept that there are various degrees of subversiveness in cross-dressing according to its purpose and effect, we can still consider it as a disturbing force in itself which reminds us of Jonathan Dollimore's concept of 'transgressive mimesis': when one sees that gaining access to areas by law restricted to men is simply a matter of clothes one cannot help noticing how absurd this male principle is. Here, as well, the repressed woman demystifies patriarchal values even when imitating them.

There was also discussion in the seminars about whether an author's prejudices against women, blacks or Jews could undermine his/her stature as an artist, and writers such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence were mentioned as examples. In relation to this, our guest speakers tried to demystify the classic figure of the author and his (only rarely 'her') preeminent stature, the point being, not to denigrate the writer, but to show how he/she uses and is used by the dominant ideology:

'Shakespeare as universal and eternal Man, and the body of the texts which he produced under determinate historical conditions as the repository of human wisdom, function together to encourage both the eradication of the memory "that they were once made" (Barthes 1972, p. 142), and to disguise the ideological process of reconstruction to which they are constantly subjected by the societies in which they now exist as manifestations of "high culture".'<sup>6</sup>

This question of reconstruction really affects those of us who are teaching and doing research on English Language and Literature. Should we ask our students to beware, to suspect the lucrative business that our reading lists support? Ought we to remind them how the English Literature curriculum contributes to an idea of 'Englishness' which, according to Christopher Norris,

---

5.-Karen Newman emphasizes the fact that Law has been an area denied to women, involving, as it does, linguistic mastery, 'knowledge of history and precedent ...logic, reasoning and rhetoric...', in 'Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange', in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38, No. 1 (1987), 30.

6.-John Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 4.

is 'identified with true native vigour and unforced, spontaneous creativity'?<sup>7</sup> Or how British English is not, after all, that 'British' since it does not include the Scottish, Irish and Welsh varieties? Can we ignore all these aspects and go on analysing 'the text in itself'? So much questioning might make many of us fear that there will be nothing to hold on to afterwards, but it will certainly be a more honest view than the idealist conception of literature as the reflection of a coherent, 'tidied up' microcosm. Even after the modernist writers' emphasis on the fragmentation of our world, some critics have still tried to prove that great literature reflects **more** harmonious types of existence. And here rhetoric plays an important role, because whereas hardly anybody would believe that Shakespeare's world was one of absolute consensus, the fact that a comparison (more... than) is established makes the idea more acceptable. The following quotation by Northrop Frye is just one of many examples of the kind:

'Shakespeare's audience lived in what was in many respects a **more** intellectually tidied-up world than ours. Practically nobody believed, or had even heard of the notion, that the earth was a planet revolving around the sun: the earth was a centre of the whole cosmos, and nature was intimately related to man.'<sup>8</sup>

As for English Studies and cultural imperialism, one already has a sense of their interrelationship as far back as Samuel Daniel's poem *Musophilus* in 1599:

'Or who can tell for what great work in hand  
The greatness of our style is now ordain'd?  
What powers it shall bring in, what spirits command,  
What thoughts let out, what humours keep restrain'd.'<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of reconstruction is the way Shakespeare's plays have been staged or performed till now and the different reactions of the audience. When Terence Hawkes mentioned in his lecture the Old Vic production of *King Lear* during the World War II, his point was that, whereas the Elizabethans had understood the connotations of the division of the kingdom, the 20th. Century audience failed to notice the political relevance of the play at that moment. One possible reason for this, suggested Alan Sinfield, was the fact that the audiences expected more information from a play during the Elizabethan period than nowadays. Whereas now classical plays are reified and the audiences do not expect to know from them about the current political situation, the case was

---

7.-Christopher Norris, 'Post- Structuralist Shakespeare: text and ideology', *Alternative Shakespeares*, op. cit., p. 49.

8.-Robert Sandler (ed.), *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* (Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1986), p. 8.

9.-Quoted by Northrop Frye in op. cit., pp. 183-184.

just the opposite in the 16th. and 17c. centuries, and that is one reason why some productions were forbidden and theatres closed down during unsettled periods. So here we have two sides of the same coin: the effect of the play on the audience and the latter's expectation from the play. What sort of prejudices (for and against) do we take with us when attending a performance of *King Lear*? How would we react towards a performance in which Goneril and Regan are not presented as ungrateful and boundlessly ambitious, but as victims of patriarchal tyranny and whim? After all, this is another possible, though not traditional, interpretation of the play, which shows us how a different reconstruction of Shakespeare's plays can check the audience's expectations, thus producing new effects.

While still considering the effect of the play on the audience and when asked how Cultural Materialism views the cathartic effect that the performance of the play may have on people, our guest speakers discussed Brecht's concept of 'Verfremdung', since Brecht himself emphasized this attempt to avoid the identification of the audience with the characters in the Elizabethan dramatic tradition<sup>10</sup>. The advantage of the 'V- Effekt' is that the audience is able to analyse the situation objectively, without being moved by the emotions aroused by the play. There is no catharsis, Brecht declared his anti- aristotelianism. In Spain, however, we have the example of a contemporary left-wing playwright, Alfonso Sastre, who at one point saw in 'Verfremdung' the danger that the actor might distance himself from the audience so much that he would become a mere narrator<sup>11</sup>. Sastre still considers it essential that the spectator should see himself in the character in the play, and now uses the term 'positive hero' as opposed to 'classical hero', the latter being too much above the audience.

This attempt to summarize the discussions in the seminars held during the 'Shakespeare Week' will most likely prove faulty in many ways. A great deal of interesting questions and comments have been, unfortunately, omitted for reasons of space, and the tenets of Cultural Materialism as rendered here will never prove to be as convincing as when defended by its representatives. A sincere word of thanks to Terence Hawkes, Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield and John Drakakis for their absolute dedication and enthusiasm, which made of the conference one of the most successful events in this Department in the last few years.

---

10.- 'Im Theater sitzen schon Frauen, aber die Frauenrollen werden noch von Knaben gespielt. Da es keine Prospekte gibt, übernimmt der Dichter die Aufgabe, Landschaft zu malen. Der Bühnenraum hat keinerlei Bestimmtheit, er kann eine ganze Heide sein. In *Richard III* (V, 3) tritt zwischen zwei Heerlagern mit Richards und Richmonds Zelten, für beide sichtbar und hörbar, im Traum der beiden ein Geist auf, der sich an beide wendet. Ein Theater voll von V-Effekten!' Bertolt Brecht, 'Der Messingkauf' (1937-1951), *Gesammelte Werke 16* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhramp Verlag, 1967), p. 586.

11.- Alfonso Sastre, *Anatomía del realismo* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1965), p. 54.



