

The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama

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The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama

ASPECTER IS haunting criticism—the specter of a new historicism. As Jean Howard tells us in a recent *Shakespeare Quarterly*, “Suddenly indifference to history has been replaced by avid interest. Renaissance journals are full of essays placing the works of Milton, Donne, and Spenser in historical context.” And not just Renaissance journals: the trend evident there is “part of a much larger critical movement in the post-structuralist period to rehistoricize literary studies” (236). This movement stems from the perception that poststructuralist criticism in its earlier textualist or deconstructive phase was essentially a continuation of formalism. However interesting at the peripheries, it retained the central impulse of formalism to focus on the text in isolation from human will and desire and from the particular social formation within which will and desire are produced, directed, controlled, satisfied, frustrated. The new historical criticism aims at putting the text back into the context from which it was generated.

This emphasis on the cultural production of texts extends to their reception as well. Audiences themselves have will and desire, which also develop in connection with social or cultural authority. Hence the new historicization of literary studies is equally a new politicization, with interpretation judged as an expression of the political interests of the audience—sometimes the contemporary audience, sometimes the modern one, sometimes both. And here again the phenomenon is by no means unique to Renaissance studies. David Simpson points out that in 1983 at least five books focused on “the politics of Romanticism” (81). Moreover, the major theoretical journals have taken a similar course, publishing special issues with titles like *The Politics of Interpretation* and *Nuclear Criticism*.¹ One final example: when Wayne Booth tells us recently in the pages of *Critical Inquiry* that he is trading in his reliable and efficient “implied reader” for a powerful new vehicle called the “real reader,” we may be sure we have turned a corner. But do we know where we are going? And are we sure we want to get there?

Putting the text back into history sounds like something we might all want to do, but we should be certain we know what history means and what the practical consequences of such a program are. It also sounds like a good idea to acknowledge the political needs of real audiences, instead of mystifying those needs with some formalist, neo-Kantian Myth of an Audience—as long as we can be persuaded that the real audience is not itself just another myth, another hypothetical construct, and that the politics of literature are not, rather, as Gerald Graff suggests, pseudopolitics. In considering these matters, I focus first on recent commentaries about Renaissance drama, but only as examples; I quickly juxtapose the Renaissance critics with other sorts of writers—such as Althusser, Foucault, and Jameson—who can define new-historicist assumptions in the most general way and who can provide the clearest framework for the questions I want to ask: How do new-historicist critics characterize the text? What do they mean by history? How do they typically understand the relation between the two?

Claiming to describe a general or typical new historicism is presumptuous; simply to write about *the* new historicism is to construct a fiction, a critical fabrication, like the Elizabethan World Picture or the Medieval Mind. Many different and even contradictory critical practices are currently represented as new historicism. Nonetheless, as I understand the project, it is at its core—or, better, at its cutting edge—a kind of “Marxist criticism.” The label does not eliminate the problem of typicality or generality; it merely relocates it. By centering the new historicism in Marxist criticism, do I mean classical Marxism or some of the different, “softer” revisions prefaced by *neo* or *post*? The answer is that I mean all of them, to the extent that they all view history and contemporary political life as determined, wholly or in essence, by struggle, contestation, power relations, *libido dominandi*. This assumption, which I find the most problematic aspect of the new historicism, brings me to the last and by far the most important question I want to

ask: Are there more useful beliefs available to us—about the world, about texts, about the relations between them—than those that typically generate new-historicist activity?

In his introduction to *The Forms of Power*, Stephen Greenblatt attempts to characterize a new critical mode “set apart from both the dominant historical scholarship of the past and the formalist criticism that partially displaced this scholarship in the decades after World War Two.” Unlike the old historicism, which was “monological [and] concerned with discovering a single political vision,” the new historicism recognizes a variety of competing centers of cultural power. This complex cultural environment, moreover, is itself constituted by interpretation. Here too there is a contrast with the old historicism, in which the cultural environment, having “the status of an historical fact [and] not thought to be the product of the historian’s interpretation,” could “serve as a stable point of reference, beyond contingency, to which literary interpretation can securely refer” (5). Greenblatt makes a similar point at the beginning of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. If we would not “drift back toward a conception of art as addressed to a timeless, cultureless, universal human essence,” we must maintain the connection between literature and society. At the same time, he refuses to give presumed facts of culture priority over literary interpretation. “If . . . literature is viewed exclusively as the expression of social rules and instructions, it risks being absorbed entirely into an ideological superstructure” (4). Greenblatt prefers to see literary and cultural knowledge as parts of the same interpretive enterprise, as interanimating each other. He therefore attempts to investigate “both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text” (6).

Of the two claims here—one not to be monological, the other not to privilege the social over the literary text—consider the second in conjunction with Greenblatt’s brief essay “*King Lear* and Harsnett’s ‘*Devil Fiction*.’” The essay begins with a skeptical reference “to modern critics [who] tend to assume that Shakespearean self-consciousness and irony lead to a radical transcendence” of Renaissance culture (239) and then discusses Samuel Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*. Observing that “where Harsnett had considered exorcism as a stage play, Shakespeare’s play is itself a secular version of the ritual of exorcism” (241),

Greenblatt concludes:

Hence the ideological and historical situation of *King Lear* produces the oscillation, the simultaneous affirmation and negation, the constant undermining of its own assertions and questioning of its own practices—in short, the supreme aesthetic self-consciousness—that leads us to celebrate its universality, its literariness, and its transcendence of all ideology. (242)

We have come a long way from the mutually generative interpretation of culture and text. Here the text is said to be produced by its ideological and historical situation; it is unambiguously dependent, while the culture is unambiguously determining. Gone as well is the acknowledgment that history is itself a text, constituted by interpretation; rather, Harsnett has assumed the objective status of a stable point of reference.

Elsewhere, too, Greenblatt’s characteristic interpretive strategy is to begin from cultural history, typically with a colonialist episode, and then proceed to the literary text. Despite the reassuring disavowals of privilege, the cultural text tends to be the prior phenomenon, chronologically if not ontologically, at least for the reader who negotiates the course of Greenblatt’s writing. Accordingly, after a dozen pages analyzing authority and subversion in Thomas Harriot’s *Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, Greenblatt turns his attention to *Henry IV, Part I*:

[T]he three modes that we have identified in Harriot’s text—testing, recording, and explaining—all have their recurrent theatrical equivalent. . . . Thus, for example, the scheme of Hal’s moral redemption is carefully laid out in his soliloquy at the close of the first tavern scene [Greenblatt means 1.2], but as in the act of *explaining* that we have examined in Harriot, Hal’s justification of himself threatens to fall away at every moment into its antithesis. . . . I have spoken of such scenes in *1 Henry IV* as resembling what in Harriot’s text I have called *recording*. (“Invisible Bullets” 53–55)

The flow here is markedly one way, from the cultural to the literary text, and the effect again is to privilege the cultural text as the stable and determining point of reference. Although the word *production* is not used, the implicit assumption is the same: as Harsnett (or the cultural matrix embodied in Harsnett) produced *Lear*, so Thomas Harriot produces *Henry IV, Part I*.

In the *Henry IV* essay Greenblatt avoids the tri-

umphal rhetoric of his *Lear* piece and moves carefully to protect his assumptions against the kinds of evident vulnerabilities I remarked on earlier:

There is, it may be objected, something slightly absurd in likening such moments to aspects of Harriot's text; *I Henry IV* is a play, not a tract for potential investors in a colonial scheme, and the only values we may be sure that Shakespeare had in mind were theatrical values. The theoretical problems that beset such appeals to the self-referentiality of literature are beyond the scope of this paper. I would observe here only that *Henry IV* itself insists that it is quite impossible to keep the interests of the theater hermetically sealed off from the interests of power. (55-56)

Here Greenblatt implies that if we resist him we must be committed to a theory of the self-referentiality of texts; it is either Greenblatt or Brooks and Warren—or, rather, a parody of formalist autonomy. But this is a false choice, and it may serve to distract us from recognizing that Greenblatt's preferred alternative to a hermetically isolated text is equally extreme on the other side. Instead of insisting on the self-referentiality of theatrical artifice, *Henry IV, Part I* is now said to insist on being constituted by the forces of real political power. Is such a view any more tenable, any less restrictive? Some voices in the play, chiefly Hal's (on which Greenblatt focuses almost exclusively), support such a view. But other voices, chiefly Falstaff's (which Greenblatt almost completely ignores), are singing different songs altogether. Falstaff's voice is also part of the play's insistence. While *Henry IV, Part I* interests us in arranging its various insurances into a hierarchy, it also thwarts this effort, so that I am skeptical about characterizing the play itself as an insurance. "Like Harriot in the New World," Greenblatt says in the penultimate sentence of his essay, "*I Henry IV* confirms the Machiavelian hypothesis of the origin of princely power in force and fraud" (57). But so many contradictory hypotheses are confirmed in the dramatic experience (and in the theatrical situation) of *Henry IV, Part I* that the play cannot be conceived of as an essentially hypothesis-confirming discourse.

In the introduction to *The Forms of Power*, Greenblatt dissociates himself from the old historicism, which he locates in Dover Wilson. When he comes to write about *Henry IV*, however, Greenblatt does just what Dover Wilson did in *The Fortunes of Falstaff*—privileges Hal's voice and narrative

over the others in the play. Or consider that model old historicist Tillyard: "Shakespeare's Histories . . . cannot be understood without assuming a larger principle of order in the background" (360). Again my point is the continuity that exists despite (or perhaps because of?) all Greenblatt's energetically protesting disavowals. For Greenblatt too, the openness of *Henry IV*—by which I mean not so much its "undecidability" as its invitation to many contradictory interpretive decisions—represents a threat that must be controlled, and the way to acquire such control is to refer the play to its presumed social and political context, to gesture toward some vague tetralogical structure of containment in the background: "what lies ahead is the charismatic leader . . . in *Henry V*. . . . To understand this whole conception of Hal, from rakehell to monarch, we need in effect a poetics of Elizabethan power" (56-57). We may indeed need this, as we needed and still need the Elizabethan World Picture, but we need a lot more besides.²

"In Dramatic composition," according to Maurice Morgann's famous adage, "the *Impression* is the *Fact*" (4). In Greenblatt, however, dramatic impressions are subordinated to and controlled by facts of social history that seem to stand behind them. It would be easy to name other new-historicist critics who, like Greenblatt (though usually far less interestingly and sophisticatedly), fail to live up to their claims about not granting a determining priority and stability to social history. But at this point I think it is more useful to shift to a general discussion and ask why these claims are hard to achieve. Here once again Greenblatt can help us begin, because he fully understands the kind of problem he is dealing with and the critical history from which it develops. "Though Marx himself vigorously resisted [the] functional absorption of art," he writes at the beginning of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, "Marxist aesthetics . . . has never satisfactorily resolved the theoretical problems raised in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere" (4). Nor do I find successful any of the solutions proposed in the current revitalization of Marxist criticism, of which the new historicism is a part.

It is tempting to construe the problem as inhering in the relation between theory and application, and in this context Fredric Jameson's work is exemplary. Jameson so interestingly and complexly nuances the relation between ideology and textuality that the distinction between them seems to disappear, as in his proposal for

the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuring of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that the “subtext” is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. (81)

But despite this theoretical richness, Jameson’s actual interpretations—of Milton and Conrad, for example—revive an old-left political allegorization that embarrasses even those critics who are themselves most deeply committed to the historicization or politicization of the text (see Goldberg, “Politics” 515–22; Simpson 74–75).

The problem in Marxist aesthetics, however, is not essentially in the relation between theory and application but in the theory itself. Take for example Althusser’s attempt in *For Marx* to soften the rigid orthodox hierarchy of substructure and superstructure. The superstructures remain relatively autonomous in their “specific effectivity”; the substructure, the “economic mode of production,” becomes determinant only “in the last instance” (111). But this last instance is apocalyptic. By contrast,

in History, these instances, the superstructures, etc.—are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before his Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes. (113)

While Althusser has come a long way from orthodox Marxism, the economic mode of production remains his conceptual point of reference, and thus the hierarchical idea persists, if in a less rigid form. In his “Letter on Art,” Althusser attempts a similar strategic redeployment of the text (or “art”) and ideology. Building on suggestions in Macherey’s discussion of Lenin as critic of Tolstoy, Althusser develops the idea that art “presupposes a *retreat*, an internal *distantiation*, from the very ideology from which” it emerges (222–23).³ Even in this formulation, however, ideology retains a privileged or substructural position, preceding and determining discourse.

The reason “the theoretical problems raised in the *Grundrisse*” have never been “satisfactorily resolved,” I would suggest, is that they cannot be. We

can get at this point through the arguments of Heidegger and Derrida: the moment (always already there) we posit duality (inner-outer, center-margin, superstructure-substructure, female-male, etc.), we are inevitably involved in privileging and hierarchy. An absolute parity of literary and social texts is a will-o’-the-wisp. More important, even if such parity were possible, it is not what the new historicists really want. Their whole endeavor is to situate the literary text in social history and thus to see it in a determined or secondary position. We might debate the extent and flexibility of this determination and withhold or accord value as we prefer. We might also debate the purpose or the intention of new historicists in claiming not to subordinate the text to social history. Are they trying to fool their readers, or have they succeeded in fooling themselves—and, in either case, why? There can be no debate, however, about the notion of dependency itself. If the new historicists abandoned the notion, they would forfeit altogether their claim on our attention.

Put another way, the theoretical problems raised in the *Grundrisse* are not just problems but solutions, the source of interpretive power for the new-historicist critics. To say that they see the text in a context does not imply a value judgment on their project, since contextualizing texts is something that everybody does perform. It merely describes what happens in all interpretive activity. My complaint earlier about the way new historicists ignore theatrical impressions was itself based on contextualization, a theatrical one. I was marching under the banner of Morgann (“in Dramatic composition the *Impression* is the *Fact*”), but it is only when we agree that the theater *is* the right context (and, indeed, a particular notion of theater) that these impressions are there to become facts. Texts do not exist without contexts (or subtexts, or interpretations), and it is the context that allows us to determine the facts of the text. If I am skeptical, then, about the new historicists’ project, the reason is not that it depends on contextualization but that I have doubts about the interest and usefulness of the particular forms their contextualization takes. And this brings us to what is really the main question or set of questions: What is the value of new-historicist contextualization? Are its versions of texts and of history useful and interesting? Why or why not? Who gain from them, and what is the gain?

These questions about the value of new-

historicist contextualizations have to wait, though, until we can determine just what that contextualization is. Before deciding whether it is good or bad to put the text back into society or recover its history, we ought to have a clear picture of the determining social history. Here we arrive at the second major claim made by new historicists: whereas their predecessors were, in Greenblatt's words, "monological [and] concerned with discovering a single political vision," they recognize a variety of competing centers of cultural power. Their claim to be engaged in "thick" rather than thin interpretive description has become another conventional gesture among new historicists both in and out of Renaissance criticism.⁴ And like the claim for a mutual constitution of the literary and the social texts, it too should be scrutinized with a healthy amount of skepticism.

For despite their protests about being open, new historicists tend persistently to fix and close their attention on the dominant institutions of Renaissance society, especially the monarchy. Jonathan Goldberg, for instance, in *James I and the Politics of Literature*, sees various Renaissance texts, both dramatic and nondramatic, as essentially feeding on and feeding a set of concerns about royal authority in James's own texts. Leonard Tennenhouse views *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Petrarchan lyrics, and Shakespeare's histories (both middle and late) all as examples of a "literature [that] had to employ radically discontinuous political strategies for idealising political authority" according to the changes in ideology in James's as compared with Elizabeth's court (110). For Louis Adrian Montrose, too, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a monarchy-centered play: "whether or not Queen Elizabeth was physically present at the first performance," her "pervasive *cultural presence* was a condition of the play's imaginative possibility" (62).

Even when not directly concerned with royal power, new historicists still tend to locate the centers of plays by referring to the ideological interests of a dominant cultural force, such as the titled or monied classes, institutions of religious authority, or male power. The colonialist enterprise is frequently a base for their interpretations. Thus Paul Brown observes that *The Tempest* is "obviously. . . heavily invested in colonialist discourse" (66; my emphasis). According to Francis Barker and Peter Hulme, "the discourse of colonialism" is "the articulatory principle of *The Tempest's* diversity" (204). But the argument is not limited to *The Tempest* (to which,

whether central or not, colonialism is *obviously* relevant). For Greenblatt, in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, colonialism provides the base from which to understand Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Seemingly important distinctions could be made among critics like these—between, for example, Tennenhouse's interpretation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as idealizing state authority and Montrose's contrary view that the play reflects Shakespeare's will to resist such authority, to create a space of his own that cannot be claimed by female-monarchical power. Such distinctions depend on whether the play is seen to ally itself with dominant cultural interests or with subordinate ones, but even these distinctions do not seem finally to matter very much. A case in point is Brown's discussion of "masterless men," a social phenomenon that embodies a countercultural threat to authority. "In *The Tempest*," Brown notes, Stephano and Trinculo "*obviously* represent such masterless men" (52–53; my emphasis), and thus the play serves as a kind of cautionary tale from the perspective of the ruling class: "the assembled aristocrats in the play, and perhaps in the original courtly audiences, come to recognise in these figures their own common identity—and the necessity for a solidarity among the ruling class in face of such a threat" (53). Brown recognizes an aspect of Stephano and Trinculo beyond the interests of ruling-class ideology, namely, our simple and raw pleasure in their appearance, but this pleasure turns out to be subordinated to the ends of magistracy after all, "a vital adjunct to power, a utilisation of the potentially disruptive to further the workings of power" (53). According to this argument, a favorite one of Greenblatt's, a dominant authority produces elements of apparent subversion or transgression as a means of maintaining its control.

The frequent recurrence of the words *power* and *discourse* in new-historicist criticism reflects the influence of Foucault, in whom Greenblatt may have discovered the idea that authority produces subversion. And yet, if we are to be precise, it is the early Foucault whom the new historicists follow. In his later work, he struck off self-consciously in a new direction, that of the *dispositif* rather than the *episteme*, and showed far more responsiveness to heterogeneity. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault tells us that "we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between . . . the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity

of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (100). He also redefines *power*, vastly extending its reference. "We must," he says "conceive of . . . power without the king" (91):

Power's condition of possibility . . . must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. (93)

Power is the whole thing, in other words—"thick description" indeed. In comparison with this passage, the work of even the most flexible and wide-ranging of the new historicists looks thin. For them, power is still reified in the monarch, or in a particular set of dominant institutions, and discourse is located in a starkly simple model of domination and subversion.

One measure of this thinness is the way new historicists ignore the contrasting rhetorical situations of the texts they discuss. Jonathan Goldberg, for instance, applies basically the same set of interpretive concerns to a Jonson masque, in which the king is at the center of the action and the audience, and to a Jonson play for the public stage, like *Sejanus*, even though for Jonson himself the difference in audience and theatrical setting was of tremendous concern. Similarly, Tennenhouse can move from Petrarchan lyrics, with their more or less courtly audience, to a public theater play like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Henry IV* without feeling any pressure to modify his thematics. Or recall Brown's comment that Stephano and Trinculo strengthen the class solidarity of "the assembled aristocrats in the play, and perhaps in the original courtly audiences." The "perhaps" commendably disclaims certainty about the responses of Shakespeare's courtly audience, but an assumption remains that the audience *was* a courtly one and that the play must be understood with that specific reference in mind. That there were royal command performances we know, but we know also that *The Tempest* was performed at Blackfriars, and most people believe at the Globe as well, for economic

reasons that new historicists especially ought to respect. It simply did not make sense to spend the time and the money to gear a play for a one-shot performance, or even for a very limited market run. And as Richard Levin points out (170, 240–41), no hard evidence indicates that any Renaissance play was written specifically and exclusively for any particular occasion.

In general, new historicists carefully avoid making any such claims (thus Montrose's indifference to the question of whether Elizabeth was present for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), but on what basis, then, do they persistently interpret these plays by citing the particular interests of cultural authority? Recent work by Ann Cook suggests that we might revise upward our notion of the popular audience's social status, but significant differences would remain among various audiences, and in any case the new historicists are not making use either of Cook's particular argument or of arguments like it. They show no interest in the question, and this on the surface seems odd. If they conceive of the text as in essence socially and culturally instrumental, how can they be indifferent to the particular social and cultural setting for which the text is designed?

For an answer we can turn to Goldberg's explanation of how *Sejanus* can represent James's concerns about authority even though the play antedates James's accession or the availability of James's own written representations of these concerns: "the play spoke to present concerns; . . . following Foucault, we can point to shared epistemic limits *conditioning* discourse and actions, onstage and off" (177; my emphasis). This argument is like Montrose calling Elizabeth "a pervasive *cultural presence*," a "condition" of "imaginative possibility"—not just for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but for all imaginative possibility. The condition that Goldberg and Montrose claim to understand is really a precondition, in the sense that it stands above or exists before all the particular circumstances of the text. These circumstances—author, audience, chronology—can be ignored because they do not matter. What matters is "power relations," "authority and transgression," and the other recurring terms in new-historicist criticism; they constitute an "episteme," replacing what appeared in an older critical vocabulary as the *zeitgeist* or the "spirit of the age." The knowledge they furnish of "present concerns" in the Renaissance is a universal knowledge, good for all concrete situations.

According to Dollimore and Sinfield, “Historical context undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text and allows us to recover its histories” (*Political* vii). What I am claiming, however, is that the histories being recovered are themselves transcendental signifieds (or sometimes, perhaps, transcendental ways of signifying) in the sense that their capacity to explain seems independent of many particulars. In this sense there can be no question of “Recovering History” (the rubric under which the first six essays in *Political Shakespeare* are grouped) in the way Dollimore and Sinfield mean, as though history were out there just waiting to be found. This notion is like Professor Welch answering the phone in *Lucky Jim*: “History speaking.” But history speaks in our voice. History does not tell us what the text is, because we decide what history is, and then put history into the text, rather than the other way around. Or maybe it is better to say that we “recover” the text and history at the same time, but again in the sense not of finding what was lost out there but of adding our own needs and desires—coating anew, re-covering the text in a Barthesian manner with words of our own.

From this perspective, the new historicists’ contextualization is just another form of interpretation, another way of deciding where and how to center the competing claims made on our attention by a variety of needs and desires. *The Tempest* can help make my point here. New historicists contend that colonialism is “the articulatory principle of *The Tempest*’s diversity,” but colonialism can also be seen as only a marginal or allusive presence in a text with some other center. A metadramatic interpretation would put art at the center; an ethical one would put self-control or *virtus* or *sophrosyne* at the center; a textualist one would see the center as a supplement, arguing that the center is the margin or that there is no center. How do we choose among these *Tempests*? If we answer, “By determining which version is historical,” we raise another question: “which historical version?” History is something that we make or “do” (J. H. Hexter’s word), and there are many ways of doing it: as the unfolding of God’s providence; as bunk; as all the best that has been thought and said in the world; as a nightmare from which we are trying to escape; as the reenactment of past thought in one’s mind; even as the doing of history. New historicists often privilege their criticism by assuming that their version of history is the thing itself, as if they were doing *history*,

but if we understand that they are merely *doing* history, then that privilege disappears. To say that the colonialist *Tempest* is superior because “the Renaissance was an age characterized by the expansion of power” does not answer the question, it begs it. Deciding that some such statement is the right thing to say about the Renaissance is precisely the interpretive choice in question. As a version of the preferred view, it cannot be said to justify the preference. (In the same way, textualists cannot justify their version by declaring something like “recent criticism has demonstrated that words can connect only with other words.” Whatever may be valuable in such a claim—probably as much or as little as saying that the Renaissance is an age of power expansion—derives from its interpretive power rather than from its descriptive accuracy.)

At the beginning of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt himself acknowledges, at least implicitly, almost everything I have said here. Though other new historicists usually do not make such acknowledgments (and though Greenblatt himself frequently writes as if he has forgotten them), we should recognize that nothing I have said undermines the new-historicist enterprise. In trying to divest these critics of their imperial new claims to privilege, I am leaving them naked only in the sense that all interpreters are naked. In arguing that they are not less “monological” than the old historicists, I do not dispute that they are monological in a different way. This difference is crucial, and it remains the basis for the value—real or imagined, great or small—of new-historicist criticism. We are back then to the main questions I raised above, but we can now phrase them a little more specifically. Earlier I asked, Why see texts as essentially determined by social history? Now the question is, Why see history as essentially determined by power relations? Who gain from such a view, and what do they gain from it?

I can start to answer these questions by looking at what I take to be the most important characteristic of the new historicism: its detachment from the text. Sometimes this attitude is explicitly urged as a matter of principle. Dollimore, for instance, appropriates Brecht as a head quotation for *Radical Tragedy*: “Examine carefully the behaviour of these people: . . . Consider even the most insignificant, seemingly simple / Action with distrust” (ii). And at the beginning of *Political Shakespeare*, Dollimore and Sinfield make a similar appeal for a “theoretical method [that] detaches the text from

immanent criticism which seeks only to reproduce it in its own terms" (vii). Acknowledged or not, this detachment is an inevitable consequence of the fundamental move of new-historicist critics—trying to see the text as essentially generated from and directed toward the politics of a historically remote period. What is the effect when writers like Goldberg and Tennenhouse see plays as claims for absolute monarchical power? or when a writer like Montrose sees a play as resistant to royal female power? or when Greenblatt, Brown, and Barker and Hulme see plays as implicated in colonialist domination? When addressed to the left-liberal academic community, for whom the monarchy is an anachronism, feminism an article of faith, and colonialism a source of embarrassed guilt, these critical versions cannot help draining the plays of much of their potential to involve an audience.

One aspect of this draining strategy is the new historicists' tendency to deemphasize passages whose affective power seems unusually great. In a fifteen-page discussion of *King Lear*, Dollimore finds no room even to consider the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia (*Radical* 189–203). Since Shakespeare often gives us moving final scenes, the strategy of downplaying such power may be a version of what Richard Levin has called "refuting the ending" (102–25). Thus in Dollimore's consideration of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the last scene disappears, or virtually so; it is merely acknowledged by way of a perfunctory contrast to Antony's speech in act 1 about Fulvia's death: "True, the language of the final scenes is very different . . . but there too we are never allowed to forget that the moments of sublimity are conditional upon absence, nostalgic . . ." (207). So much for Cleopatra's death scene. Dollimore's own last gesture is a stern warning, under the rubric of "Sexuality and Power," that Cleopatra's kind of allure is dangerous and destructive in its power to infatuate. This may be sound advice, as may have been, in their not so different ways, the lectures on moral duty and self-control that earlier critics delivered to Antony. But are there *no* moments at the end of *Antony and Cleopatra* "where we are allowed to forget," even encouraged to forget, such pragmatically self-protective prudence? The purest form of "refuting the ending" among new historicists is Goldberg's version of *Julius Caesar*. Commenting on the apparition of Caesar that comes to Brutus at the end of act 4, Goldberg says, "So, *finally*, Brutus sees 'that which is not in me.' . . . *At last*, Brutus sees the very form

of power before him. . . . Brutus, only *at the very end*, with the ghost, even sees what it was he wanted" (*James I* 176, 185; my emphases). Here we are told, three times, that the play ends after the fourth act. Refuting the ending is one thing; erasing it, as Goldberg does, is another.

"In Marxist theory," Maureen Quilligan says, "as well as in all strong modern theories of interpretation, the assumption necessarily is that the text does not, at the surface level, want said what the critic finds in it to say" (29). From this perspective, we can see that the detachment of new-historicist criticism has the virtue of its defect: by reducing the power of the text, detachment increases the observer's power over the text—the power to see through the surface, penetrate its disguises. Hence for Catherine Belsey, detachment is a way of getting to the ideological forces behind the text, which are invisible to the culture in which the text was produced and accessible only from the privileged perspective of remoteness. What results then is "a scientific criticism":

distancing itself from the imaginary coherence of the text, analysing the discourses which are its raw material and the process of production which makes it a text, [such scientific criticism] recognises in the text not "knowledge" but ideology itself in all its inconsistency and partiality. (Critical 128)

For Frank Lentricchia, too, criticism is an antagonistic enterprise, though the struggle is not just with the text but with the conservative interpretive establishment. What we need, he tells us, is

a way of "interrogating" the text so as to reproduce it as a social text in the teeth of the usual critical lyricism that would deny the social text power and social specificity in the name of "literature." The activist intellectual needs a theory of reading that will instigate a culturally suspicious, trouble-making readership. (11)

For many new historicists, the power over the text derived from this suspicion is instrumental to social change, part of the project of making the world a better place. Dollimore and Sinfield, for example, assert that "cultural materialism" (their phrase for the new historicism) "registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on the grounds of race, gender and class" (*Political* viii). Frequently these political claims for interpretive styles are made tacitly, as in Edward

Said's implication that a connection somehow exists between formalism and the bombing of Vietnam (2–3) or in Lentricchia's controlling suggestion throughout *Criticism and Social Change* that Kenneth Burke's version of reading leads to social justice and Paul de Man's to an acceptance of the absence of justice. Such connections seem too abstract and polemical to be convincing. It is impossible to serve Kant and Marx, say the new historicists, but the young Empson did just that. I am not denying that there are connections between interpretive and political actions; such a claim would be counterintuitive and intolerable. But the connections are tenuous and volatile, and they vary from reader to reader, text to text. Moreover, if transforming an exploitative social order should be the prime directive of one's activity, then there are simply more effective ways of proceeding. Sinfield admits as much in his wry and amusing concession that even the approved "cultural materialist" mode of "teaching Shakespeare's plays and writing books about them is unlikely to bring down capitalism, but it is a point for intervention" ("Give" 154). Maybe so, but not a very significant point, especially in the context of Eldridge Cleaver's remark that "if you're not part of the solution you're part of the problem." "Marx and Engels were well informed of new and important literary developments," Pierre Macherey assures us, "but they never made anything of their knowledge because they never had the time" (105). When there is a world to change, even a thoroughly ideologized text may not seem important enough.

Despite the strong political advocacy of many new-historicist critics, it would be wrong, I think, to regard the new historicism itself as necessarily or essentially associated with political action, if for no other reason than that such a view would exclude the most powerful of all its practitioners, Stephen Greenblatt. His is not an activist criticism; in fact, the story that Greenblatt always tells is the reverse of a revolutionary one. "There is subversion, no end of subversion," says Kafka to Max Brod in a remark that Greenblatt quotes twice with approval in his *Henry IV* essay, "only not for us" ("Invisible Bullets" 53, 57). In the epilogue to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Greenblatt explains that this conclusion was forced on him:

When I first conceived this book several years ago, I intended to explore the ways in which major English writers of the sixteenth century created their own performances.

. . . But as my work progressed, I perceived that fashioning oneself and being fashioned by cultural institutions—family, religion, state—were inseparably intertwined. In all my texts and documents, there were, so far as I could tell, no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society. (256)

In this view, human power to shape the world, even to fashion that small part of the world called the self, turns out to be illusory. There is no free space in Greenblatt's conception of culture, not in the theater, not for the self. As sometimes in Foucault, or at least in the earlier Foucault, we are only what we are constituted to be by the power relations that govern, anonymously and without human face, even the governors.

New-historicist criticism then, though it can naturally take a politically activist form, need not be identified with that form, and its valuing of detachment cannot be hooked necessarily to the project of social change. Why then is detachment valued? The answer appears to be in the conception of the text as a threat, a hostile otherness designed to dominate the reader. But this response raises a further question: Why is the text so conceived? Not because it is "scientific" to conceive it this way. This criticism is scientific only in the same way it is historical; that is, it is scientific in a particular way. By *scientific* Belsey means simply predictive; guaranteed procedures enable us to see the text as a move in a power game. But at issue here is precisely the assumption that the text *is* such a move—or the "proposition" that it is: "Althusser *proposes* that the task of ideology is to conceal its own role in reproducing the conditions of the capitalist mode of production" (*Critical* 128; my emphasis).

For an explanation of the new historicists' wish to conceive of the text as hostile and threatening, we can turn again to Lentricchia: "the activity of interpretation . . . does not passively 'see,' as Kenneth Burke puts it, but constructs a point of view in its engagement with textual events, and in so constructing produces an image of history as social struggle, of, say, class struggle" (11). In this view, the relation between the text and the audience replicates exactly the antagonistic power relations at the center of new-historicist thematics. According to Jameson, "History is . . . the experience of Necessity. . . . History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as

collective praxis" (102). The text, then, is part of history so conceived, and interpretive activity therefore acts out the deepest intuition of new-historicist critics, that of being surrounded by a hostile otherness, enmeshed in a complex matrix of forces all of which threaten their freedom.

I think we can now, finally, answer the question about the value of the new historicism. Whether the new historicism looks like a good or a bad kind of criticism will depend on whether or not we share its underlying intuition. Should we share it or not? Only a fool or a saint would not share it, at least in some measure. "It's a jungle out there" is a cliché, but the thing about clichés (or proverbs, or *topoi*) is that they express a common belief. But is this cliché the totality of legitimate belief, or even the dominant belief? Other beliefs and other intuitions—other clichés—are possible. These center on concepts like kindness, or at least tolerance, and benevolence, or at least cooperation. Against "it's a jungle out there," they say "love makes the world go round." This second kind of cliché has become a great embarrassment to us; it trails clouds of Wordsworthian diction, of something far more deeply interfused, or worse, of Tennysonian sentiment, of the hope that something good will be the final goal of ill. Such clichés are vulnerable to attack as screens masking a desire to dominate or as false consciousness, even in their weaker forms (those above prefaced by "at least"). Hence Lentricchia observes that "the mere pluralization of voices and traditions (a currently fashionable and sentimental gesture) is inadequate to the ultimate problem of linking repressed and master voices as the agon of history, their abiding relation of class conflict" (131).

Yet this sort of assertion is itself vulnerable, because it is not really an argument. Its persuasive capacity depends first of all on our believing the assumption that the will to power determines human activity and social organization. It simply repeats this assumption as a way of responding to a contrary assumption, or a contrary intuition, about kindness and benevolence. It is like Ring Lardner's "Shut up!" he explained." Saying "it's a jungle out there" will not convince those who believe that "love makes the world go round." The reverse is true as well, of course. If then we choose between these competing intuitions, the choice cannot be determined by verification, for there is no way of deciding which intuition is right except from

a position where the decision has in effect already been made. I am not arguing that choice is impossible, merely trying to relocate its basis, to make the primary consideration, not correspondence to the way things really are, but usefulness.

I myself do not find it useful to believe that human activity is essentially determined by the will to power, because it is hard to base much of a future on that belief. More to the point, Lentricchia finds himself in the same position, of having to imagine a future that somehow transcends antagonism: "a genuine community . . . the establishment of a consent, of a 'we' . . . Marx without Stalin" (13). Lentricchia nowhere gives us any substantial description of this goal or even the slightest idea of how to achieve it. He cannot, I think, because he has renounced not only notions of benevolence and bourgeois clichés about pluralism but even the Marxist version of such clichés, proletarian solidarity, to which his own training and theoretical commitment would naturally be drawn. Indeed, some of the wittiest and strongest parts of *Criticism and Social Change* dismantle, or show how Kenneth Burke dismantled, those very clichés. But without these notions, or some version of them, or room among one's beliefs to include some version of them, how can we imagine a community of any kind, let alone "genuine" community? "It's a jungle out there" by itself leads only to more jungles, where the best we can hope for is to become King of the Forest. We do not therefore have to believe that "love makes the world go round," but we should have room for this belief, next to the room for the jungle. It would be foolish indeed (or saintly) to hold that benevolence is *the* human essence, the force that through the green fuse drives our flower. But is it any less foolish to substitute the will to power? Getting beyond humanism is supposed to mean getting beyond such essences, not merely exchanging one for another, replacing the flattering with the cynical.

Anyone who, like me, is reluctant to accept the will to power as the defining human essence will probably have trouble with the critical procedures of the new historicists and with their interpretive conclusions. Acquiring power over the text will seem a costly achievement, since what it sacrifices is the potential power of the text—the power to open up new areas of experience, unfamiliar ways of being in the world. New-historicist procedures are designed to resist any such power, to work around or get beyond immediate textual impres-

sions to arrive at a predetermined point of theoretical understanding, which is the point from which one comes to the text in the first place. Lentricchia observes that critical activity “produces an image of history as social struggle, of, say, class struggle.” The “say” is good, suggesting a coincidence, the possibility that any number of images might have emerged. Here we can also recall Belsey’s remark that “scientific criticism . . . *recognises* in the text not ‘knowledge’ but ideology itself.” New-historicist criticism is a criticism of recognition, of knowing again what one knew before. It is criticism that systematically deprives the text of its capacity to surprise, and who wants to go to a theater where there are no surprises?

To the extent that the new historicism takes the surprise out of theater, it seems to me a bad thing. Nonetheless, I want finally to acknowledge the enormous interest and energy this kind of criticism has generated. It has done so in part because, as I mentioned at the beginning, it is a more varied activity than my representation suggests. While the conception of the text as a hostile otherness is, I believe, the dominant or normal conception, new historicists sometimes work out of different and more useful assumptions.⁵ Moreover, even their dominant assumption can sometimes generate engaging criticism, as it does for Greenblatt. Essentially a typical new historicist, he understands the antagonistic relation between text and audience and aims—no less than, say, Lentricchia does—to master the text before it masters him. But master the text he does. Like Dryden’s Jonson, Greenblatt “invades

authors like a monarch; and what would be theft in other[s] is only victory in him” (82). By organizing rich details from Renaissance literary and social texts into powerfully interesting narratives, he achieves a critical self-fashioning that is hard to resist. Whether or not Greenblatt delights in the sheer power of his critical performances, they are a pleasure for any audience. For this reason they frequently convey the impression not of a depressing impotence, the result one might expect from their recurring thematics, but of a great and highly individualized interpretive strength.

But the success of the new historicism should not be limited to local triumphs or particular criticism. The project answers a generally felt need within the profession. Most of us no longer find it helpful to isolate the literary text from other discursive practices and have moved toward a less specialized kind of critical activity, which might be called culture criticism or maybe, if we follow Richard Rorty, just criticism. I believe that this development is a good thing, despite my quarrel with particular new historicists. As Robert Scholes says, “one does not have to be a Marxist to endorse Fredric Jameson’s battle cry, ‘Always historicize!’” (qtd. by Graff, “Teaching” 180). Putting the text back into history (or better, histories: our histories, its histories) is clearly a valuable project. Maybe it is the only project. In any case, it is far too important to be left to the new historicists.

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Notes

¹ *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 (1982): 1–280 and *Diacritics* 14.2 (1984): 1–81.

² Both the *Harriot-Henry IV* and the *Harsnett-Lear* essays were later expanded from the original publications I have been quoting, the first under the same title and the second as “Shakespeare and the Exorcists.” The later versions are included in the *Works Cited*. Since Greenblatt’s capacity to interest depends on the inclusion and orchestration of circumstance and detail, expansion is nearly always improvement: more is more—but, in regard to the critical procedures and assumptions I have been examining, more of the same.

³ Greenblatt refers to this essay in a somewhat different context (*Renaissance* 153). Terry Eagleton discusses Althusser’s position, which he considers “suggestive” though “radically unsatisfactory” (82–84).

⁴ “Thick description” is Ryle’s phrase, appropriated by

Clifford Geertz (a major influence acknowledged by Greenblatt) as an interpretive method at the beginning of *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Similar claims for social analysis that acknowledges a variety of cultural forces are made by Sinfield, *Literature* 3; Dollimore, *Radical* 7 (borrowing from Raymond Williams); and Jameson 95.

⁵ For Foucault in “What Is an Author?” and for Belsey in “Disrupting Sexual Difference,” the text is essentially subversive of the “normalizing” force of cultural authority. Disagreeing with Greenblatt’s contention that subversion is produced by authority, Dollimore argues that Renaissance theatrical texts can be appropriated in different ways (“Introduction” 12); and Dollimore and Sinfield point out that the interpretive decision on how to appropriate a play depends on assumptions about the play’s “diverse conditions of reception” (“History” 225).

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