Postmodern Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT

Relieved by the collapse of literary criticism of his status as Great Author, Shakespeare is newly available for interpretation. The plurality of readings released by postmodern criticism, however welcome, brings with it a danger of eclecticism, which has the effect of suppressing dissent. The critical institution thus becomes paradoxically uncritical, and interpretations risk going unchallenged and unrefined. A radical postmodernity needs to find a way of promoting debate, even though this cannot be grounded on certainty.

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Shakespeare has entered the postmodern condition, and this must surely be seen in the first instance as a liberation. No longer an authority on Life, nor a moral guardian and guide, no longer even an aesthetic model, Shakespeare is at last open to interpretation. It might, of course, be argued that he always was; but the problem, as I see it, is that deference got in the way of reading. Only by treating Shakespeare's plays as the effects of a culture, a history, a theatrical tradition, rather than the work of a genius, can we begin to examine them as texts.

As Shakespeare studies retreat from metaphysics, Shakespeare's work becomes a basis for new kinds of analysis. In extreme cases, it is interesting

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only as a site of critical struggle, the occasion for interpretations which reveal more about the moment of their own production than either Shakespeare's or ours, a sourcebook for a history of the critical and theatrical institutions. To the rest of us, the plays have become the material of another kind of cultural history, a way of approaching an understanding of their own period which historicises in its difference the characteristic values and beliefs of the present. Historically specific, relative, Shakespeare's texts can be read from the present as a way of encountering the meanings in circulation in a past culture.

This liberation of Shakespeare is an effect, paradoxically, of the collapse of literary criticism. The conjunction of these two events became clear to me recently as I reread a clever and illuminating book on Shakespeare. The argument, very broadly, concerned the dramatisation of stories that were already well known —*Troilus and Cressida, Antony and Cleopatra,* for example— and the struggle of Shakespeare's characters to inhabit identities that were culturally pre-scripted for them. The book, which was published by Harvard University Press, was not more than two years old. It was stylish, witty and persuasive; the argument unfolded logically and intelligibly; it drew on the insights of recent theoretical developments; and it made me aware of aspects of the plays that I had never seen before. Given all this, I could not account for a mounting feeling of dissatisfaction as I read. What more did I want, after all? It is unusual enough to get that particular combination of pleasures from a single volume. In fact, I find that simple literacy is increasingly rare these days. And this book was both literate and intelligent. 'But it's still', I heard myself say, as I put it down to reflect on my own ungracious response to a good book, 'but it's still only literary criticism'.

What I suddenly knew was that literary criticism is a thing of the past, and that we have entered, irreversibly, a new epoch. Literary criticism was officially the desire to illuminate the text, and only that, to give an account of it, explain its power. It was reading for the sake of reading. But thoughtful critics knew they could not stop there. In the first place, the text had to be worth it: to *exercise* a power that needed to be accounted for. And in the second place, since language was understood to be a medium, an instrument, the explanation had to be located elsewhere, beyond the text itself, in a realm of ideas which was, paradoxically, more substantial than words. In its heyday, therefore, literary criticism had two main preoccupations: aesthetic value as justification for the study of the text, and the Author as explanation of its character.

Traces of the Author remain, not just in critical biographies, but in examination papers which divide the syllabus under authors' names, and in the resulting discussions students conduct about their revision plans. Shakespeare, of course, commonly gets a paper of his own. The implications of this division

of the available material were that the natural way to make sense of a text was to locate it in relations of continuity and discontinuity with other works by the same author. And the implications of that assumption in turn were usually that texts were intelligible primarily as expressions of something that preceded them, a subjectivity, a world view, a moral sensibility, a rhetorical skill. Literary criticism of this kind was, it turned out, neither criticism nor particularly literary: on the contrary, it was a quest for an origin which was also an account of an aetiology, an explanatory source prior to the text: insight, creativity, genius.

This last category was the one that linked the Author with aesthetic value. 'How deep an insight is displayed here?', literary critics asked. 'How much creativity?' 'What degree of genius?' To us, in these days of quality control, the notion of grading literary works begins to seem as vulgar as assessing commodities, or indeed departments of literature. If this kind of evaluation seems gross as applied to academic departments, how much more offensive to do it to Authors, some of whom are, after all, alleged to be geniuses, in possession of insight and creativity.

It was the practice of making aesthetic judgements on Authors which vindicated the construction of the canon, and literary criticism has been brought into disrepute by the process of unmasking the ideological element inscribed in the ostensibly disinterested list of canonical texts. The Western canon, we now know, is the location of political as well as aesthetic values. Only the purest formalism has been able to escape the recognition of its own investment in the works selected for approval, and the blindness to misogyny, imperialism and heterosexism which has characterised not so much the texts themselves, since they are often more ambiguous than their admirers allow, as the criticism which endorses them. Reading has become more sceptical, more anxious to affirm a distance between the preoccupations of the text and the values of the reader.

In my own case, it was feminism, alongside Marxism, that played the largest part in the process of unmasking. In 1970 Kate Millett's witty and devastating accounts of Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and, above all, D H Lawrence began to ensure that my reading life would never be the same again. What was at stake was injustice. This was not primarily injustice on the part of the authors themselves. What, after all, was to be gained by blaming them? Some of the most culpable ones were dead, and the others probably beyond reconstruction. The point was that they themselves were products of their culture. Exit, therefore, the Author, and enter a mode of reading which was closer to cultural history. The next move was that texts, like history itself, began to be perceived in consequence as the location of conflicts of meaning. Unity was no longer a virtue —where, after all, was the special merit in a

monologic misogyny?— and coherence ceased to be grounds for praise. The text, we discovered, might display symptoms of resistance to its own propositions, might be open, in its undecidability, to more than one interpretation. Moreover, what *perpetuated* injustice was not so much *Lawrence's* anti-feminism (say), as the way *criticism* reaffirmed the misogyny readers were already in danger of taking for granted, by praising his work without drawing attention to its implications for sexual politics. Exit, therefore, the idea of criticism itself as a transparent practice in the service of literature, and enter a new attention to the institution of literary studies and the power relations confirmed by the knowledges it produced.

Since then we have learned to identify injustices of other kinds. Homoerotic and post-colonial criticism are currently leading the field. The universal wisdom attributed to canonical texts was, we now know, white, Western and homophobic, as well as bourgeois and relentlessly patriarchal. The voices silenced for so long by the grand narrative of a humane and humanising literary tradition are now insisting on being heard, offering new readings of the canonical texts, and drawing attention to works the canon marginalised. Suddenly, we cannot get enough of incitements to acknowledge injustices, past and present. As we repudiate the illusion of impartiality, the goal of objective interpretation and the quest for the final, identifiable meaning of the text, English in its entirety has found itself in the postmodern condition.

Restored by my recognition of the terminal state of literary criticism, I returned to the elegant book on Shakespeare, and found that I had radically misjudged it. The conclusion made clear that this was a book about identity on the eve of the Cartesian moment; it was about subjectivity as always and inevitably pre-scripted, and about the longing for total individuality and self-determination which in those circumstances can never be realised (Charnes 1993). Mercifully, it was not literary criticism at all. Instead, it was an extremely skilled and sophisticated reading of some very complex and sophisticated texts, locating them in the cultural history of the emergence of what was in due course to become the American dream —and the political implications of that for all of us can hardly be overstated.

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With the collapse of literary criticism, Shakespeare's plays have ceased to act as the foundation on which the canon rests, the justification of canonical values themselves. In the light of the death of the Author, his texts are no longer

to be treated as a means of access to the wisdom contained in the familiar domed head, which made its earliest appearance in 1623 as the frontispiece to the First Folio of Shakespeare's collected works.

But in only a very few instances has the result been the repudiation of Shakespeare in the construction of a reverse critical discourse, the insertion of a negative which keeps the terms of the original analysis in place. Though there have been assaults on 'the bard', as his detractors ironically classify him, Shakespeare is only rarely denounced or rejected. On the contrary, freed from the constraints of aesthetic value and the Author, a new kind of interpretation treats Shakespeare's plays as materials in the construction of a renewed and invigorated practice of reading. Perhaps more than the works of any other writer, Shakespeare's texts have become a new world, with all the promise of emancipation that the American New World once offered.

The New World has always represented an escape from persecution and poverty at home. According to the dream of the emigrants, it would be an unspoilt territory that they could remake in the image of an ideal that was generated out of, and in contrast to, their previous unhappy experience. The old culture was the motive for the new. In a similar way, it is our own world that current scholarship has been most profoundly engaged with, and eager to remake or relocate. Boatloads of Shakespeare critics have recently put to sea to escape the oppressive regime of traditional, moralistic, monologic interpretation, and founded flourishing communities of New Historicists, feminists and cultural materialists. Now groups spring up dedicated to the exposure of racism and colonialism in the period, and to the identification of homoeroticism on the one hand, and indeterminacies of gender on the other. The newest of these resistance movements manage to achieve independence practically without a struggle. Recognition is virtually immediate: suddenly the profession seeks out injustices and longs to correct them. The past is invoked to cast light on the present, to account for imperialism, heterosexism, homophobia, and to denaturalise them into the bargain.

Is this account of the current state of Shakespeare studies utopian? Not absolutely: we're almost there. And is it to be welcomed? Of course! No longer aspiring to uncover the single truth of Shakespeare's singular genius, we are in now a position to attend to the voices the grand narrative of his enduring wisdom silenced or marginalised for so long. Repudiating the illusion of impartiality, the goal of objective interpretation, and the quest for the final, identifiable meaning of the texts, in the course of little more than a decade Shakespeare studies has found itself, along with the rest of English, postmodernised.

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Since I take it so much for granted that this is a positive development, that the plurality of voices now audible in Shakespeare studies marks a much-needed improvement on the bad old days, I want to venture a tentative reservation about the effects of this new-found liberation. Jean-François Lyotard, whose analysis of postmodernity I have invoked here, so far without acknowledgement, points in a famous passage, commonly and perversely misread by his opponents as a prescription, to one of the main dangers of the postmodern condition. It is *eclecticism*, he argues, that marks the degree zero of postmodern culture. Eclecticism seeks novelty without discrimination; eclecticism evades debate and effaces disagreement; eclecticism insists that anything goes, and consequently contests nothing. It sells well; it generates an atmosphere of undifferentiated cosiness; and it produces what Lyotard calls the 'slackening' that accompanies a reluctance to subject intellectual propositions to theoretical analysis (1984: 76; 1988: xiii).

It seems to me that there is a danger —I put it no higher— that the new Shakespeare studies might just settle into a comfortable eclecticism. As long as we all respect each other's subject positions, so the case might go, and respect them the more to the degree that they lay claim to a political correctness on the basis of a history of maximum injustice, plurality constitutes its own justification, and heterogeneity comes to represent an end in itself. Once these criteria are fully accepted, the argument might run, critical debate becomes unnecessary: the market will judge; sales figures can be left to determine which books are important, which endure and which are ephemeral. Disagreement, which is grudging, grim and unpleasurable, can go the way of the old regime. We radicals, it would then appear, could all come on as gratifyingly warm and supportive of each other's work, citing each other as authorities when we have no time to check the sources.

And what, after all, would be lost here? Celebration supplants the carping, grudging, critical academy of the previous generation, when every essay opened with a bibliography of all the people who hadd got it wrong in the past. Now we pay tribute to our friends; in consequence, our conferences are occasions of pure festivity, and everyone has a good time. But we fail, I think, in the end, to take each other seriously. Serious intellectual exchange depends, in my view (and Lyotard's, of course), on dissent. The New Historicism challenged the work of C S Lewis and Tillyard; cultural materialism explicitly criticised the government's educational policies; recent work on homoeroticism draws attention to the heterosexism of Western culture. They derive their sharpness and their

energy from these disputes with orthodoxy. But is that to be the end of the story? Are these positions then beyond improvement in their turn? And if not, where is refining and redefining debate to come from in an eclectic world? From the market? I doubt it. The market sometimes seems to go our way, but its long-term imperative is to create an unending succession of new orthodoxies, so that we all have to keep on buying its products. It has no motive for enhancing the refinement of positions which is the effect of critical dissent.

Of course, we have not yet reached the carnival of eclecticism that I both desire and fear. There is still a certain amount of critique around —in the various essays, for instance, of Richard Levin and in Brian Vickers's denunciations of recent 'appropriations' of Shakespeare (1993). This is good knockabout stuff, which surveys the kingdoms of postmodern Shakespeare studies and finds them all very silly. Magisterial dismissals, on the basis of selective quotation and a stout refusal to understand the theories underpinning the work, are not, however, what I mean by dissent. It is not only that vituperation is no substitute for thinking. It is also that critique, which belongs to the Enlightenment tradition, comes from the outside, from another position, which is determined not to give an inch. Understanding the issues is quite a different matter. Paradoxically, you have to understand it in order to break with it in a radical way; you have to inhabit it, but other-wise. Critique is not dissent. Conversely, dissent, which engages with the work it also contests, is not, in the end disrespectful: it wants to move on, not back, on the basis that where things are is both intelligent and intelligible, but open to productive redefinition.

Critique took for granted that what was at stake was a single, knowable truth. Postmodernity, by contrast, deprives us of the possibility of certainty. We can know, postmodern theory insists, only in language (or a parallel signifying practice), and there can be no guarantees that a system of differences with no positive terms offers an accurate map of the world. Truth is not an option. But only binary thinking supposes that it follows from that proposition that it is impossible to be wrong. Readings can be inattentive, scholarship less than rigorous; arguments can misrepresent or ignore the documents. Interpretations that mean to be radical can lead to reactionary conclusions. There are no sure safeguards, but academic debate and scholarly dissent point to inaccuracies and draw out inferences. Postmodernity does not necessarily lead to the suspension of academic judgment.

There have, of course, been instances of dissent that we should take seriously in Shakespeare studies. I think, for example, of Jean Howard's essay on New Historicism (1986), Marguerite Waller's account of Stephen Greenblatt's anti-feminism (1987), Jonathan Goldberg's attack on the homophobia widespread

in readings of Renaissance culture (1992), Deborah Shuger's review of Annabel Patterson's book on Elizabethan politics (1993). At their best, these are courteous, reasoned and serious instances of the kind of thing I have in mind. But the fact that it is possible to count them on the fingers of one hand is an indication that dissent at this level is the exception rather than the rule.

It is time, perhaps, to produce an example, to register an instance of my own dissenting voice. To the considerable surprise of Europe, which finds the motive forces of history elsewhere, American New Historicism has paid a great deal of attention to the monarchy: we might think of Greenblatt on Henry VIII (1980: 11-73), Louis Montrose on the Queen (1988), Jonathan Goldberg on James I (1983), and more recently Leah Marcus on both Elizabeth and James (1989). In each case this is sophisticated, elegant work, and it advances our understanding of the period in general, and of Shakespeare in particular, to a point we cannot retreat from. But I want to draw attention to one of the side effects of this focus on absolutism and its discontents. It wonderfully unites us all against a common enemy, which is long dead and therefore constitutes no threat whatever in the present. The wickedness of absolute monarchy is entirely consensual in the Free West in the late twentieth century; it vindicates our respective revolutions; it reassures us that the present is a good deal better than the past; and in that sense its implications are deeply conservative. I genuinely mean no disrespect to the authors mentioned —I have learnt from all of them— if I say that it is time to move on, which is to say to move beyond dominating personalities, even the personalities of monarchs, into an account of Shakespeare's cultural moment which listens more closely to its discords, its own debates, *its* dissent.

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What links the diversity of analyses which constitute the postmodern study of Shakespeare is that we are all, I think, doing in various ways what I want to call history at the level of the signifier. We are all, that is to say, looking *at* the texts of Shakespeare's culture (or the documents, or the material objects) in order to read the meanings they produce and reproduce, and not *through* them to a reality that is understood to lie beyond. (The slightly tiresome ubiquity of the word 'discourse' is evidence that we have come to believe that culture resides in the signifier, and not beyond it. And to deflect the attentions of future Richard Levins at this point, I want to stress that I do not mean that there is no such thing as the real world, but only that, like the culture we study, we too identify the real —and its practices— in language.) It is worth bearing in mind, however, that in

all the subsequent rereadings, rewritings and deconstructions of Saussure's intimation of the opacity of the signifier, one common thread is the insistence that meaning is plural, sliding, differed and deferred, unanchored, and heterogeneous to the point where an affirmation and its opposite, power and resistance, may share the same inscription. Dissension, in other words, inhabits discursive practice, characterises it, and at the same time destabilises it. Texts take issue with other texts, but they also differ from themselves, inscribe the conflicts they take part in. This implies that the cultural analysis we produce, history at the level of the signifier, could appropriately *record* dissent, as well as enacting it.

It is perhaps too easily assumed that other epochs were somehow simpler than our own, or that the cultural history of former periods is appropriately represented as ultimately unified, homogeneous. Our world, we allow, is divided, full of debate, culturally diverse and intellectually stratified, but anthropology, in conjunction with nostalgia, still tempts us to imagine a previous culture as a consensual world, in which the important meanings and values could be taken for granted as shared, despite distinctions of language, class or gender. This seductive account of the past seems to me fundamentally misguided, and nowhere more so than as an interpretation of the early modern period, where virtually every topic was matter for dispute, much of it passionate, some of it violent. In my view, the century between 1550 and 1650 in England was one long moment of dissension, where radical shifts in economic and political relations were both the condition and the effect of fundamental challenges at the level of ideas, and these challenges in turn were the result of cultural exchanges between the present and a recovered classical past, among the emerging European 'nations', and between the Old World and the New.

But it is also, I think, misguided, however seductive, to identify difference simply with conflict. Sometimes difference is synonymous with indifference. As I see it, the Renaissance was also a period when knowledges that were self-evident in one genre of writing might well be entirely ignored in another. Medical advice might be contrary to clerical instruction, for instance. Sometimes conflicting knowledges would compete for supremacy; but in other cases cognitive dissonance simply subsisted without closure. Incompatible convictions, rationalist on the one hand and magical on the other, profoundly sceptical in one instance and deeply sentimental in another, might survive alongside each other, sometimes contesting the same ground, sometimes without ever coming into contact. We do the period an injustice, I increasingly believe, if we try to make its meanings and values fit together to form an internally consistent totality, to make physiological knowledge 'explain' Shakespearean comedy, for instance, especially if to explain is to efface or resolve the discordant elements within the

texts. At the very least, physiology and comedy are different genres, addressed to different audiences, on different occasions.

Dissent is the reason why things change, or one of them, at least: the one that is open to our appropriation, as the blind mechanisms of the market are mostly not. And the instabilities of cultures are the pressure points for change. If injustices are our concern, we need a version of cultural history that acknowledges incoherences and offers evidence that things change, so that we have grounds for hoping that in the long term injustice might be significantly reduced. Otherwise, there is no point in complaining. We need, in other words, a theory and practice of reading that foregrounds dissent.

Nowhere is cognitive dissonance more evident than in fiction. Part of our sense of the density of some of Shakespeare's plays, part of their ability to make a sense, however varying, to succeeding generations or from distinct political positions, may be the effect of a conjunction within them of different knowledges, which precisely do not cohere into a single, decipherable, decodable, thematic *message*. Fiction, which may have no design on its audience but to entertain, can afford to mingle the propositions currently in circulation, without any obligation to rationalise them. As a space of play, where some of the prohibitions of the symbolic Law are temporarily suspended, fiction can permit inconsistency without irritable reaching after resolution.

Fiction, then, and Shakespeare's fiction no less than any other, is a crucial element in the cultural history we produce, and if some of us have tended to single out tragedy for the purpose, that is because in tragedy dissonances which motivate the action are not finally disguised or occluded. In the plot Iago's scepticism prevails over Othello's romantic dream; at the level of representation, it is the other way round. The play has no need to legislate between them, to find a way forward, because, since there are no survivors, there is in that sense nowhere to go. Tragedy juxtaposes Hamlet's ethical scruples with the pragmatism of Fortinbras, and leaves the choice to the audience. It is not an impartial rendering, of course: the choice is not a neutral one. But the play is not incomplete because it fails to pronounce a verdict. Unlike comedy, which seeks closure in reconciliation, tragedy can afford to leave dissent on display. Tragedy, then, offers a special kind of material to the historian of cultural dissonance.

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If any of this is persuasive —my plea for dissent in the profession, or my project for a cultural history of dissent— we have a good deal of work to do.

I am still not sure, myself, how to take issue with other people's analyses in a way that genuinely demonstrates respect. The British tradition, in a direct line of descent from Pope and Swift, sets out to deride and humiliate. We British need, in my view, to learn how to disagree with a measure of courtesy.

Meanwhile, I am still working on ways of interpreting texts that focus on the instabilities of meaning. Here it is primarily French theory that we need to rely on. The process of rethinking the practice of reading in general, and the study of Shakespeare in particular, is well and truly under way already, in my view, but at the same time, and perhaps mercifully, we still have a good way to go.

The case of Shakespeare could, I believe, be generalised to the English syllabus in general. The same liberal desire to correct injustice slides easily into a similar eclecticism, as politically motivated specialisms allow everyone to pursue their own preoccupations, avoiding the rigours of serious debate, thankful that someone else is attending to the issues we have no time for. Indifference, masquerading as respect, takes the place of productive dissent.

English in Europe, however, is at an advantage here. Outside the United Kingdom the canon never had the purchase that it has at home, where it represents our cultural heritage. In Europe English has always been a form of cultural studies. Less agonised by the injustices perpetrated in the past of a foreign culture, English in Europe can afford to bring conflicting positions to bear on each other, and can risk dissent from emerging orthodoxies, where disagreement seems likely to sharpen and clarify the original position. It may be that European departments of English will be in the strongest position to take advantage of the collapse of literary criticism and the corresponding development of a mode of reading which is both postmodern and genuinely radical.

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