

SHAKESPEARE, CULTURE, NEW HISTORICISM

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Abstract. *In the 1980s, New Historicism was a strikingly innovative way of examining literary history, as well as practicing literary theory. Greatly influenced by the work of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, New Historicists in America and their British counterparts, Cultural Materialists, set to rewrite the history of Western literature in such a way as to challenge what they considered the socio-politically determined literary canon of the past. In practice, this meant that classical texts from Renaissance and Romanticism - Shakespeare's plays in particular - were re-viewed from a far less favorable perspective; great works of art were discovered to have been reproducing the discourses of power and sustained the system, without ever seriously challenging it - asserting thus the oppressive omnipotence of culture. This paper explores not so much the theory of New Historicism/Cultural Materialism but the potentially dangerous uses of both the assumptions these critics start from and the conclusions at which they arrive. The works examined closely are several essays by Stephen Greenblatt and Alan Sinfield in which they attempt to demonstrate that Shakespeare's plays, from King Henry IV to Othello, are the most powerful instruments for the promotion of culture. These interpretations are necessarily contrasted with the humanist tradition that set up Shakespeare as the most passionate explorer (by no means the promoter) of Western culture and its many crimes.*

The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron – they'll exist only in Newspeak version, not merely changed into something different but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be.

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

New Historicism has more in common with Newspeak than the explicit verbal link (the word "new"). The sole aim of Newspeak, as one of the characters in the novel unwittingly remarks, is to *narrow the range of thoughts*, this being the basis of successful long-term domination and exploitation. This essay will attempt to demonstrate that New Historicism, richer, subtler, seductively profound, seemingly non-ideological (to say the least), ironically performs the same function.

Stephen Greenblatt

When encountered for the first time, the essays of the American critic Stephen Greenblatt seem, above anything else, rich and complex to the point of intoxication.

Here, at last, the not-so-innocent reader exclaims, here is everything: the New Critical alertness to *the words on the page*, plus the context, missing in New Criticism proper-historical, biographical, intellectual; plus, the structuralist – Marxist awareness of the shaping powers of economic forces, ideology and language. Finally, there is an impressive body of evidence, drawn not only from literature¹, but from history, philosophy, sociology as well, ensuring the much wanted scientific sanction for the traditionally problematic literary studies.² It seems that, in Edmund Wilson's memorable phrase, the 'oscillation of the pendulum' has ceased, and that we have arrived at rich, powerful and liberating critical theory and practice.

Yet, seeming, as Hamlet knew too well, is not the same as being – liberating, for example. New Historicist theory in general, and Greenblatt's practice in particular, reveal upon closer examination, several rather problematic aspects. First, however, let us examine the general theoretical background.

In the *Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Raman Selden gives a concise list of the "new set of assumptions"³ on which New Historicism is grounded. The postmodernist insight that "history is always narrated" is unarguably brilliant. That "there is no stable and fixed history which can be treated as the 'background' against which literature can be foregrounded" is, again, anything but invalid in our post-post-modern age. When the new set of assumptions, however, comes to include the idea – treated as an axiom! – like this one: "We cannot⁴ transcend our own historical situation", New Historicism becomes suspicious. Why this stubborn insistence on human beings – artists included - hopelessly trapped in the specific historical moment, and the specific culture?

Another assumption is even more disturbing in its radical fervor:

Literary works should not be regarded as sublime and transcendent expressions of 'human spirit' but as texts among texts. We cannot now accept that a privileged 'inner world' of 'great authors' is to be set against the background of an 'outer' world of ordinary history.

These two short sentences, together with their eye-catching punctuation, say a lot. Judging by the inverted commas, it is clear that New Historicists do not believe in human spirit, or in the existence of great authors. Or in the inner world, for that matter. (One is again reminded of *Nineteen-eighty four* and the denial of privacy, of precisely those inner worlds that are the potential sources of resistance.)

How does Greenblatt fit in the picture?

I am committed to the project of making strange what has become familiar, of demonstrating that what seems an untroubling and untroubled part of ourselves (for example, Shakespeare) is actually part of something else, something different.⁵

¹ One of the basic assumptions of New Historicism is that works of literature should be regarded and read as "*texts among texts*".

² The studies that, as Terry Eagleton remarked, not so long ago, "rambled comfortably from Tennyson's poems to the length of his beard."

³ Pp 188-9.

⁴ Italics mine.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt. *Learning to Curse. Essays in Early Modern Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1990);p 8

This is the announcement Greenblatt makes early in his collection of essays entitled after Caliban's famous rejoinder to Miranda. His noble attempt to *defamiliarize* Shakespeare, however, very soon proves to be a thorough, well-planned and supremely executed denunciation of everything Shakespeare stands for in the humanist tradition – including, and it is to this that Greenblatt pays most attention, the resistance of the individual and the ceaseless, potentially subversive questioning of authorities. In Greenblatt's essays, from a 'relentless demystifier of culture' Shakespeare is masterfully turned into a 'dutiful servant, content to improvise within its [his culture's] orthodoxy.'⁶ This alone has sweeping consequences to which we will return later. First, it is necessary to examine closely how Greenblatt does it.

A part of the explanation lies in the work of French Marxist-structuralist thinker, the abovementioned Louis Althusser. In his crucial essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser did two things that were to become the basic assumptions of Greenblatt's work: first, starting from the well-known Marxist maxim "it is not the consciousness of man that determines their political being, but the political being that determines their consciousness", Althusser asserted, apparently for all time, the inescapable consciousness-shaping power of ideology⁷ – something that Greenblatt would later call *fashioning*. Secondly, as the direct outcome of this, Althusser literally abolished the notion of the individual. According to his essay there are no individuals, only *subjects* (with all the immediate associations of submissiveness and helplessness). Here are some of his characteristic *declarations of dependence*:

Individuals are always-already subjects.

Individuals are abstract with respect to the subjects which they always-already are.

Before its birth, the child is always-already a subject in and by the specific familiar ideological configuration in which it is expected.⁸

If the word 'over-determination' did not exist, it would have to be invented.

Now, it is important to stress that not all Marxist critics agree with Althusser's ideas. Terry Eagleton, for example, states that

Althusser's suggestive essay is seriously flawed. It seems to assume, for example, that ideology is little more than an oppressive force which subjugates us, without allowing sufficient space for the realities of ideological struggle...⁹

True, and good. But not good enough. Eagleton appears to be concerned only with ideological struggle; it is unlikely that he conceives of the possibility of any other kind of struggle. In the long history of literary criticism there were those who supported the *high authority of the self in its quarrel with its culture*, for example. In Marxist, as well as in new historicist theory and practice, however, the self does not have any authority (let alone high authority!) because it does not exist. It does not exist, that is, unless as the product of countless social, political, economic determinants, unless it is *fashioned, de-*

⁶ Stephen Greenblatt. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980);p 253

⁷ Ideology, of course, not as 'a set of doctrines', but 'the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole.' Terry Eagleton. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. (London:Methuen & Co.Ltd, 1976);p

⁸ Louis Althusser. *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, *Literary Theory:An Anthology*, ed., J. Rivkin and M. Ryan, Blackwell, 1998.

⁹ Terry Eagleton. *Literary Theory. An Introduction*. (Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press, 1983);p 173

*liberately shaped by family, state and religious institutions.*¹⁰ As far as *the quarrel with culture* is concerned, it is, by spectacular verbal maneuvers, turned into a sine qua non of the very same culture. To put it simply, the more one tries to resist or question the dominant cultural order, the better he/she serves it, willingly or not. Is this a paradox? Or something worse?

Invisible Bullets

Greenblatt's typical procedure consists of first, producing a lesser-known historical anecdote, this particular type being regarded as *the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real*¹¹ - that is to say the blend of literature and history and thus very suitable to the interests of New Historicists who maintain there is no difference between the two - and second, arguing that Shakespeare's plays merely reproduce the same model. The main thesis that he attempts to verify is that subversive doubts - *in history the same as in art* - never subvert the prevailing socio-political order, but help sustain it. Subversion is, in his unforgettable phrase, reduced - subverted - to *an expression of inward necessity*¹².

"The threatening other - heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist - must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed."

Invisible Bullets, the paradigm of the new historicist method, begins with the narration of how a man called Thomas Harriot converted Indians to Christianity in the *New Found Land of Virginia*, in the sixteenth century. In order to successfully complete his task Mr. Harriot used force and - lies. The Indians were told that the Christian god is so powerful that he might kill them with invisible bullets if they do not accept Christianity - and when some died of measles, the lie was more than conveniently confirmed. So the Indians were fooled into becoming Christians. "Harriot tests and seems to confirm the most radically subversive hypothesis in his culture about the origin and function of religion by imposing his religion on others." The subversion lies in the fact that Harriot visibly demonstrates that religion, contrary to faith, originates in and functions by coercion and deceit. Yet, Greenblatt continues, Harriot is not burned as a heretic. His hypothesis does not really threaten religious power, on the contrary, it serves to confirm, as well as illustrate, its force.

Thus the subversiveness that is genuine and radical - sufficiently disturbing so that to be suspected of it could lead to imprisonment and torture - is at the same time contained by the power it would lead to threaten. Indeed, *the subversion is the very product of that power and furthers its ends.*¹³

That is the fate of subversion in history. What about subversion in Shakespeare?

Shakespeare's 'histories', Greenblatt admits, are much more complex, but ultimately they are the same as Harriot's *Brief and True Report* - in the sense that they represent, test and explain the "self-undermining authority", without ever seriously threatening it. In

¹⁰ Paraphrases from Greenblatt's Introduction to **Renaissance Self-Fashioning**.

¹¹ "The historical anecdote functions less as explanatory illustration than as disturbance, that which requires explanation, contextualization, interpretation. Anecdotes are the equivalents in the register of the real of what drew me to the study of literature, the encounter with something I could not stand not understanding." Stephen Greenblatt. **Learning to Curse**. p 5

¹² From *Invisible Bullets*. **Literary Theory. An Anthology**, ed., J. Rivkin and M. Ryan, (Blackwell, 1998)

¹³ Italics mine.

other words, though Shakespeare's plays give voice to subversive ideas, such ideas are always-already contained within the power discourses of the given social order. To simplify even more, there is no escape from the *cool webs* of discourse, ideology, and culture, especially not into art.

In Harriot's case, the self-undermining authority was religious order thriving on physical violence – the most palpable manifestation of power! – and lies. In Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, the authority is not as impersonal, "it" has a *human form divine*, as well as a name – he is a young prince Harry, known as Hal. In one of the first scenes Shakespeare presents him coolly calculating his own moral fall and his shiny, seemingly unexpected expiation and redemption:

So, when this loose behaviour I throw off
 And pay the debt I never promised,
 By how much better than my word I am,
 By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
 And, like bright metal on a sullen ground,
 My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault;
 Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
 Than that which has no foil to set it off.

[I Henry IV, I, 3, 202-8]

Glittering, show, attract more eyes are the key words here. They clearly reveal Prince's preoccupation (mania?) with presenting the public with the images of himself, playing out the various roles, thus skillfully manipulating all the people around him – including the incredible, brilliant, larger-than-life, Jack Falstaff. It is painfully visible that all along he is playing with those black and white images of himself in order to acquire power, the real, palpable power of public approval that was, in Shakespeare's time as in ours, the key element in any flourishing, long-term reign. Shakespeare does not stop here, he goes on to locate the origin of Prince's carefree lack of moral scruples – it is his father, King Henry the Fourth. His speech from act III exposes the identical awareness of the importance of carefully presented images:

By being seldom seen, I could not stir,
 But, like a comet, I was wand'red at;

 And then I stole all courtesy from heaven
 And dress'd myself in such humility
 That I did pluck allegiance from men's hearts

 Thus did I keep my person fresh and new,
 My presence, like robe pontifical,
 Never seen but wond'red at

[I Henry IV, III, 2, 46-57]

Yet, Greenblatt says this is not subversive. How is it possible? He gives two reasons. The first is that "theatricality is not set over against power but is one of power's essential modes", "the form itself [that is, the play performed on stage] helps to contain the radical doubts it continually provokes". This is partly correct and partly merely preposterous – it

is to a certain extent true that the power of various 'princes' depends on their shows, theatricality¹⁴, but to argue that subversion by definition cannot take place within this mode is irresponsible – it can, and it does.

The other reason is odd, to say the least. Greenblatt claims, "The very doubts that Shakespeare raises serve not to rob the king of his charisma, but to heighten it (...)"

The question that has to be asked is: who finds the prince/king charismatic? Even when (or *especially* when) he was played by young and handsome Keanu Reeves, in the brilliant film reading of *Henry IV* called *My Own Private Idaho*¹⁵, Hal is monstrous rather than charismatic. The fact that Greenblatt finds him so is then, more than interesting – it inevitably brings to mind the close links between homosexuality, masochism and the love of male authorities promoted and encouraged in western culture.

Henry V in *Invisible Bullets* is seen as another attempt at subverting the authority of the king - this time showing even more explicitly his hypocrisy, his using the idea of God for justifying his ambitions. God is used here to give divine sanction to the glorious "project" of conquering another country, killing its soldiers, raping its women, looting and plundering. God is responsible for mass slaughter of the French, says Hal, who is now king; we the English have the "glow of divine approval over the entire *enterprise*"¹⁶. Yet Hal himself does not believe in this, and Shakespeare is bold enough to show it. The king acknowledges, as Greenblatt says, "these expiatory rituals and even 'contrite tears' are worthless". Therefore "Hal threatens to execute anyone who denies God full credit for English victory"- well aware, at the same time, that he is lying, that he is a fraud. Apparently, this as well is not subversive enough, and the only reason Greenblatt provides is that "today (...) at a time when it no longer seems to matter very much, it is not at all clear that *Henry V* can be successfully performed as subversive". What he has in mind is the weakening of religious faith that culminated at the end of the 20th century. But the argument is simply not good enough, since any modern version of *Henry V* might replace the insignificant word God with more awe-inspiring words, like democracy, or human rights. Imagine Hal who says that he has just ordered the killing of thousands of French (...fill in the blanks...) in the name of human rights or the holy war against terrorism, but of course, he does not believe in them. Wouldn't that be subversive?

Greenblatt in the end manages to 'deconstruct' himself. After claiming that "this apparent production of subversion is (...) the very condition of power", he concludes by saying: "We are free to locate and pay homage to the play's doubts because they no longer threaten us. There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us."

¹⁴ This is, indeed, exemplified by Queen Elizabeth's declaration quoted by Greenblatt: "We princes are set on stages in the sight and view of all world".

¹⁵ *My Own Private Idaho* is the film written and directed in 1992 by a famous *indie* director Gus Van Sant. It is a modern reading of *Henry IV*. The main plot centers on the relationship between Hal and Falstaff – best defined by Falstaff's "Thy love is worth a million: *thou owest me thy love*" [I Henry IV, III, 3, 136-7]. It is because of this that the film has been qualified as 'modern' – because it exposes emotional blackmailing modern people are so fond of (the same blackmailing and manipulating we see as Hal's distinctive feature), and not because Hal and Falstaff wear jeans. The subplot involves a young boy, the character who corresponds to Shakespeare's Poin – here called Mike, in search of the Mother. Interestingly enough, Shakespeare's play is not the only connection of this film with literature – there are allusions to Hesse and even James Farrell (!) in certain scenes and phrases.

¹⁶ Italics mine. Hal uses the word *enterprise* to refer to mass murder, with the immediate association of the capitalist/imperialist enterprises that would happen hundreds of years later. The word used today is not *enterprise*, but the impulse is the same – to hide crimes behind rhetoric.

What does this mean? The plays were not subversive for Elizabethan audience; they were contained within the discourse of Elizabethan order, as Greenblatt was at pains to prove -yet, the plays are not subversive for us, either; they do not threaten us ('us'- presumably the twentieth-century audience). And then, unexpectedly - "there is subversion, no end of subversion". Well, where is it? And if not for the Elizabethans, and not for us, for whom, then?

SINFIELD'S POLITICS OF PLAUSIBILITY

Greenblatt, it should be admitted, at least used the word subversion. In denying the possibility of this activity, British Cultural Materialist Alan Sinfield goes a step further: "I have generally used the term dissident rather than subversive since the latter may seem to imply achievement..."¹⁷ The long list of the words suggesting weak possibility – may, seem, imply – signals Sinfield's attitude from the start – achieving subversion is so impossible that he literally eradicates it.

Sinfield builds his theory –exemplified in the essay entitled *Cultural Materialism, Othello and the Politics of Plausibility* - on the structuralist assumption that language – *discourse* – determines and inevitably limits our experience of reality. The main argument for the apparent impossibility of resistance, not to mention serious subversion, is significantly given as a travesty of the real question - the rhetorical question:

"If we come to consciousness within a language that is continuous with the power structures that sustain the social order, how can we conceive, let alone organize, resistance?"

The view of culture and the position and function of so-called individuals is again strongly influenced by Althusser, and, in the many statements like this one, Marxism is never far away: "Identity is not that which produces culture, nor even that which is produced as a static entity by culture; rather, *the two are the same process*"¹⁸. Thus there is no possibility of moving beyond culture, as some older critics, apparently foolishly ignorant, advocated.

Like Althusser, Sinfield stresses that societies need to produce materially *and ideologically* in order to survive. The ideological production takes the most powerful of forms, that of story telling. The stories produced are more or less plausible, with an important consequence: the more plausible they are, the sooner will they become common sense. Once firmly established as common sense, these stories are immensely powerful precisely because ideology in them is invisible.¹⁹

"It is very difficult", Sinfield claims, "not to be influenced by a story, even about yourself, when everyone else is insisting on it." And he reaches for Shakespeare's tragedy to prove his case.

Everyone in the play, including Othello himself, is exploiting the stories that are highly influential, because they are plausible enough. It does not matter whether the sto-

¹⁷ Alan Sinfield. *Cultural Materialism, Othello, and the Politics of Plausibility*, **Literary Theory: An Anthology**, ed., J. Rivkin and M. Ryan, Blackwell, 1998

¹⁸ Italics mine.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes called such stories "myths", in the sense that this is any narration that has the task of "giving an historical intention a natural justification."

ries are true or not, what matters is their plausibility. In other words, they are all operating with what Greenblatt termed *probable impossibilities*.²⁰

It is plausible that Desdemona is an adulteress, for example, because, as Iago tells Othello

She did deceive her father, marrying you:
And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,
She loved them most.

[Othello, III, 3, 206-8]

Once fallen, is it not possible she would fall again, as Richardson's Lovelace would repeat two hundred years later.

Othello believes this story. Not only that, he acknowledges another powerful story, the one that presents him as an *erring barbarian* – he exploited it at first, telling fantastic, exotic stories to Desdemona and the Venetian Senate – and he does behave as he is supposed to: he kills his wife, for this is how, in the white mind, barbarians behave. Sinfield argues that Othello is wholly conditioned by the stories of the social order that imperceptibly but firmly establish dark skinned people as *the Other*, automatically demonized. When, at the end of the play, Othello recognizes himself as the threatening *Other*, he does what he is conditioned to do, what he has been good at throughout his brilliant military career: destroy him (self). Hence his mentioning of "*heathen Turk*" and how he "*smote him thus*" in the very last lines of Othello's speech.

Sinfield does not stop here: he goes on to deconstruct what he sees as another popular romantic myth, that of Desdemona's rebellion. In the version of *Othello* Sinfield writes, Desdemona's rebellion is, as Greenblatt would say, contained within the power system she seems to test/threaten. She appears to be rebellious, Sinfield claims, but, ironically enough, she "is offering a straightforward elaboration of official doctrine, which said that a woman should obey the male head of her family, who should be first her father, then her husband". "(...) her moment of *power* ends once the men have accepted her marriage." We should note contradiction here: Sinfield denies Desdemona's act any subversive potential (it is no more than an elaboration of officially approved doctrine), yet, a few lines later, says, "Her more extreme action-marrying without paternal permission, outside the ruling oligarchy (...) *is so disruptive* ..." ²¹

As far as the other quotation is concerned, we should be aware of its implication, and that is: Desdemona marries in order to exercise the power "of throwing the system into disarray". Neither Sinfield nor Greenblatt (who offers a much more complex interpretation of *Othello*²²) mention love. Power is there. The inescapable culture, also. Buried guilt because

²⁰ Stephen Greenblatt. *The Improvisation of Power. Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980); p 234

²¹ Italics mine

²² In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* the last chapter, *The Improvisation of Power*, is on *Othello*. The greatest part of the chapter is devoted to Iago, another "juggler" figure (like Hal), a skillful, self-conscious manipulator of everyone around him. His 'distinctive feature' is his ability to improvise, that is, "the ability to transform given materials into one's own scenario". The given material is "sexual anxiety". Iago "plays upon Othello's buried perception of his own sexual relations with Desdemona as adulterous" (Why were they perceived as adulterous? Because "An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife"-Greenblatt produces a mass of quotations and historical anecdotes to prove that this was the prevailing attitude. Thus Iago uses Othello's repressed feeling of guilt, intensified by his and Desdemona's getting so much pleasure out of sex. Tormented by "deep current of sexual anxiety" which "with Iago's help expresses itself (...) as the perception of adultery" Othello murders Desdemona, turns her into a piece of "monumental alabaster" (suggestive of purity, sterility, frigidity-no pleasure!). Othello's insistence on proving and confessing is, unfortunately, not commented upon –

of enjoying sex too much, too. At best, love is mentioned only as erotic love. Perhaps this should not be so odd. It is no wonder that the critics who claim that ideology is omnipotent, that it is promoted in Shakespeare's plays, do not mention love - love is the most disturbing, the most really, not seemingly, subversive force. Aldous Huxley put it nicely, almost proverbially - *when the individual feels, the community reels* - and if one wants to prove that *community* is all-powerful, which is apparently Sinfield's and Greenblatt's intention, one will deny love existence. The most problematic point in Greenblatt's otherwise brilliant essay is that he talks about sex only - whether Othello and Desdemona enjoyed it too little or too much *is* important for the understanding of the play but it is not the whole story. Greenblatt obviously takes the role of Iago who at one point in the play cynically dismisses love as "*merely a lust of the blood*". Both Iago and Greenblatt, as it were, reduce the rich complexity of love to only one aspect - sexual passion, because it is easier to deal with. One cannot but be reminded again of Aldous Huxley and the brave new world in which people are encouraged to be promiscuous but not to be in love. It seems that both Sinfield and Greenblatt find it difficult to accept the possibility that Desdemona loved the man she married, that she did not play a little rebel only to be powerful for the moment.

In addition to denying the possibility of subversion, Sinfield does something equally dangerous: shifts the responsibility from concrete individuals to impersonal culture. "The racism and sexism in the play should not be traced just to Iago's character, or to his arbitrary devilishness, but to the Venetian culture (...) the violence here is not

Othello's alone, any more than Venetian racism and sexism are particular to individuals." How is it possible to say something like this? Well, it is precisely because individuals are "subjects" and because resistance to culture is abolished that absurdities like this sound "plausible".

What about Shakespeare? We have been shown that in *Othello* Iago, Cassio, Othello himself, tell plausible stories, stories that "work" because they are "probable". In Sinfield's opinion, at another level Shakespeare's plays are such powerful, probable stories. And they inevitably sustain the culture they question. "By appealing to the reader's sense of how the world is, the text affirms the validity of the model it invokes." Shakespeare's "stories", therefore, by "holding the mirror up to nature", by "just representation" not only of "general nature" as Dr Johnson argued, but of power structures as well, are convincing, plausible; consequently, they cannot but confirm, assert, the validity of those same power structures.

In a word, Shakespeare inevitably sustains the unjust, power-intoxicated system because he is too good a writer.

Farewell, thou canst not teach me to forget.

Romeo and Juliet [I, 1, 231]

There is much that is attractive, by no means only superficially attractive, about New Historicism/Cultural Materialism.

In the first place, it is the awareness of the presence of particular ideology in all aspects of life. Not acknowledging that ideology in its subtle and the less subtle forms affects the lives of political animals, including artists, would be naïve. Claiming, furthermore, that artists create in ivory towers, blessedly untouched by the misfortunes of com-

though it is this dangerous equation of material proof, facts with truth that Shakespeare criticizes - but Greenblatt does not see it that way. In the end, he finds it necessary to repeat, "theater is perceived as the concrete manifestation of power."

mon humanity sentenced to a life imprisonment in an increasingly oppressive society and history, would be even more dangerous than any other case of willing blindness. The fact is that there are power structures, and there are ideologies to promote them and keep them going, hence these critics' attempts to make them more visible are laudable.

Moreover, the author of this paper could not agree more with Sinfield's claim that human lives are shaped by the stories – the only difference is that I am deeply grateful for it.²³

However, the profound error of this critical practice lies in the fact that these well-read, quite intelligent men *idolize* the power of ideology – they not only detect it, but also make it absolute in their stories. Then, treating greatest works of art as texts among texts, though seemingly very democratic, is very wrong. Shakespeare's or Marlowe's plays are not historical or sociological documents *only* - there is an additional, aesthetic dimension. They are beautiful. It is in this beauty of a line like *steal love's sweet bait from fearful hooks*²⁴ that all the possibilities of freedom are hidden. Therefore it is ridiculous to claim that Shakespeare sustains the system. It is individuals who do it, once they are talked into being no more than *subjects*. Those who refuse, if only in a "few cubic centimeters of [their] brain", will find rich beauty and unlimited freedom in Shakespeare, in literature, in life.

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²³ Contrary to what Sinfield tries to prove, it is my deepest conviction that not all the stories are produced by and for the power structures. Which means there is a possibility of going far beyond culture.

²⁴ Romeo and Juliet, II, prologue

ŠEKSPIR, KULTURA, NOVI ISTORIZAM

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