

**"Discursive Forums, Cultural  
Practices: History and Anthropology  
in Literary Studies"**

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In his 1986 Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association, J. Hillis Miller noted with some alarm a recent and pervasive transformation of literary studies:

As everyone knows, literary study in the past few years has undergone a sudden, almost universal turn away from theory in the sense of an orientation toward language as such and has made a corresponding turn toward history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context, the material base . . . , conditions of production, technology, distribution, and consumption . . . (Miller 1987: 283).

Miller's list of unhappy developments is generous enough to encompass a great many recent trends in the field, among them New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, Feminism, various forms of revisionary Marxism, and Cultural Studies; it is also general enough, I suspect, to resonate with analogous developments in other disciplines--with the heterogeneous movements we are here regarding, under the rubric of an unlikely singularity, as the historic turn. Whatever affiliations and alliances we do discover within and between disciplines, the general reorientation of literary studies that Miller describes has indeed been an emergent force in my own field. Not everyone "knows" it, however, in terms of the trajectory Miller provides--as a universal turn away from theory.

Since I am here as something of an anthropological informant, mediating between the native's point of view and the social scientist's, a bit of local knowledge might help to explicate Miller's hypostatized invocation of theory. In describing "theory" as "an orientation toward language as such," Miller stakes out a decidedly parochial domain, one identified with certain reduced and strictly American versions of deconstruction--what amount, in fact, to rather faulty translations of Derrida as he was incorporated into formalist modes of literary analysis in the United States. Derrida's emphasis on the overdetermined structures of certain hierarchized binary oppositions in Western culture is highly fraught in its implications for the study of social, political, and ideological formations, and has provided a useful tool for cultural analysis, not only for literary critics but also for some historians.<sup>1</sup> In the strand of American literary deconstruction Miller himself has promoted, however, Derridean overdetermination becomes a linguistic and rhetorical indeterminacy of meaning; Derrida's famous and much misunderstood statement that "there is nothing outside of the text" (il n'y a pas de hors-texte) becomes instead an assertion, endlessly reiterated in close readings of canonical literary works, that there is no way of getting outside the (literary) text, due to its tropological aporias of meaning. Miller's "theory" can stand in opposition to "history, culture, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions" only because, as Louis Montrose has suggested,

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<sup>1</sup>For an adept use of Derrida for the historical study of gender and politics, see the recent work of Joan Wallach Scott (1988).

Miller radically polarizes the discursive and the social. "The prevailing tendency across cultural studies," Montrose notes, "has been to emphasize their reciprocity and mutual constitution: on the one hand, the social is understood to be discursively constructed; and on the other, language-use is understood to be always and necessarily dialogical, to be socially and materially determined and constrained" (Montrose 1989:15).

Although the various modes of socio-political and historical criticism that have emerged in recent years are diverse in their theoretical origins and assumptions and sometimes at apparent if not fundamental odds in their ideological agendas, they are generally in accord in their efforts to redraw the boundaries of literary studies, to reconceive, in terms of a mutually constitutive and open-ended dialectic, the relationship between literary and other cultural discourses, the discursive and the social. Although neither as sudden nor as universal as Miller hyperbolically suggests, such a reorientation does challenge and has begun to alter some traditional paradigms and practices of literary criticism: the aesthetic analysis of literary texts, regarded as relatively self-contained linguistic artifacts, is being displaced by the ideological analysis of discursive cultural practices, including but not restricted to the literary, and non-discursive practices as well; the interpretation of literature within a strictly literary history, a diachronic sequence of canonical texts in dialogue with one another but otherwise relatively autistic, is being opened up to a less teleological but decidedly more heteroglossic interpretation of the social, political, and historical conditions of possibility for literary production, and of the recursive effects of literary production and dissemination upon those conditions. The literary is thus conceived neither as a separate and separable aesthetic realm nor as a mere product of culture--a reflection of ideas and ideologies produced elsewhere--but as one realm among many for the negotiation and production of social meaning, of historical subjects, and of the systems of power that at once enable and constrain those subjects.

This emphasis on the literary as both a form of and a forum for cultural practice, on literary analysis as a vehicle rather than an end in itself--a means of gaining access to other cultural forums and to the complex and heterogeneous processes through which social meaning and subjects are produced--bears obvious relationships to developments in anthropology and sociology over the past fifteen years (Ortner 1984). It is also a prominent feature of what has come to be known as the New Historicism, which I intend to examine in some detail here. It was in 1982 that Stephen Greenblatt first spoke of a "new historicism" that was noticeably reshaping the study of English Renaissance literature, and although<sup>2</sup> few of those centrally associated with the movement were happy with the label,<sup>2</sup> it definitely caught on. Raised or reified to capital status and shorn of its inverted commas, New Historicism is now used to describe similar and very different historically-oriented work in other periods of literary studies, and has also become strongly associated with the multi-disciplinary scholarship published, since its inception in 1983, in the journal Representations. Although neither originary in its emphasis on cultural practices and production nor an entirely unified or fully cohesive movement, New Historicism has consequently received a great deal of

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<sup>2</sup>For representative early works, see Jonathan Goldberg (1981), Louis Montrose (1980a, 1980b), Steven Mullaney (1980), Stephen Orgel (1975), Leonard Tennenhouse (1982), as well as Greenblatt's own seminal book, Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980).

debate and discussion in recent years, in both academic journals and the popular press. It has been characterized by Edward Pechter as a Marxist "specter . . . haunting criticism," although Pechter's sense of what unites and defines various Marxisms is, it must be said, decidedly curious ("they all view history and contemporary political life as determined, wholly or in essence, by struggle, contestation, power relations, libido dominandi" [Pechter 1987:292]); conversely, it has been viewed as a politically evasive, essentially liberal movement complicit in the structures of power and domination it analyzes (Porter 1988). Some see it as a pernicious conspiracy, allied with feminism and ethnic studies, bent on perverting immortal literature and timeless, universal values (See Montrose [1989:29], citing an editorial in The San Diego Union), and others as a largely male appropriation, displacement and/or erasure of feminist concerns and critical practices (Newton 1989; Boose 1987; Neely 1988);<sup>3</sup> as something of a climatic phenomenon, a Californian cult or fad (Kermode 1989),<sup>4</sup> and as the emerging orthodoxy of literary studies (Montrose 1986); as a break from and critique of the various, pre- and post-structuralist formalisms that have dominated literary studies (Greenblatt 1982, 1989), and as the latest manifestation of such formalism (Liu 1989; Montrose 1989). The contradictions one encounters moving from one survey to another are enough to justify a caveat, framed with a Cretan rather than Californian context in mind: no survey is to be (entirely) trusted.

## I

Unlike other disciplines, literary studies have traditionally been oriented toward the examination of a specific canon of texts, oftentimes conceived as relatively autonomous cultural artifacts; even when such study has been in some sense historical, the relationship between literature and history has customarily been constrained by the reflectionist model implicit in the binary opposition of literary text and historical context. Early definitions of New Historicism emphasize its departure from such approaches. Thus Greenblatt

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<sup>3</sup>Although there has been a consistent tendency by some to situate New Historicism and feminism as antagonistic movements, as in conference panels entitled "Feminism vs. New Historicism," there has been a great deal of salutary influence in both directions, and a significant amount of work by male and female critics that would be difficult to categorize with such binary exclusions. In a recent conference address, Jean Howard provided an astute ideological critique of the institutional and disciplinary pressures that induce divisive and exclusionary positioning of such movements in the American academy, and stressed the need to resist those pressures and to pursue instead the mutually productive affiliations between various forms of cultural study. For a fuller discussion of Feminist and New Historicist literary criticism, see below.

<sup>4</sup>In an uncharacteristically splenetic moment at the 1986 Modern Language Association--the occasion, as well, of Miller's Presidential Address--Dominick LaCapra described the movement as a "West Coast Foucauldianism of infantile desire," or so my transcription of his remarks reads. For a more considered discussion, see LaCapra (1989).

speaks of literary works as "fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests" rather than "as a fixed set of texts that are set apart from all other forms of expression . . . or as a stable set of reflections of historical facts that lie beyond them." Such an approach "challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between . . . artistic production and other kinds of social production" and shifts analysis from the literary in itself to the role that literary production plays in the larger social formation:

These collective social constructions on the one hand define the range of aesthetic possibilities within a given representational mode and, on the other, link that mode to the complex network of institutions, practices, and beliefs that constitute the culture as a whole (Greenblatt 1982:6).

Such a shift shares certain assumptions with recent developments in British Marxist literary studies, characterized by its practitioners as a form of Cultural Materialism. Although not avowedly Marxist in terms of its politics, New Historicism is equally indebted in its theoretical orientation to the work of Raymond Williams (from whom the phrase "cultural materialism" derives), especially to his articulation of the nature and functioning of hegemonic culture.<sup>5</sup> In Williams' development of Antonio Gramsci's concept, hegemonic culture is neither singular nor static, nor is hegemony synonymous with cultural domination; on the contrary, the culture of any given historical period is conceived as a heterogeneous and irreducibly plural social formation, and as a dynamic process of representation and interpretation rather than as a fixed ensemble of meanings and beliefs. In such a view, culture is an ongoing production, negotiation, and delimitation of social meanings and social selves, composed through both discursive and non-discursive means and in various and competing forums. Moreover, as Williams reminds us, the dominant culture of any given period is never either total or exclusive, never an accomplished fact but rather an ongoing process that "has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified" because it is being "continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own"--by marginal, residual, and alternative cultures that, together with the dominant, comprise the hegemonic (Williams 1978:112).

In calling for a cultural as opposed to a historical materialism, Williams did not of course intend to suppress history but rather to move away from the overly teleological models of history associated with classical Marxism, and to displace the economic as the final ground of materialism by focussing historical analysis<sup>6</sup> instead upon what might be called the symbolic economy of any given period. This entails, to my mind, a methodological shift toward a more cultural or anthropological criticism that has not been adequately reflected in British Cultural Materialism of the past decade. Jonathan Dollimore's Radical Tragedy (1984), for example, combines the

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<sup>5</sup> Although Williams is not often cited by Greenblatt, he is one of the central and often unrecognized influences on the latter's work. For others explicitly indebted to Williams, see Mullaney (1988) and the extensive series of essays by Louis Montrose.

<sup>6</sup> For the phrase "symbolic economy" in this context, see Mullaney (1988:41-47, 96-97).

findings of relatively traditional historians of ideas with familiar Marxist modes of ideological analysis to examine explicit anti-humanist ideological debate on the Jacobean stage. The study is a powerful one, and Cultural Materialism in general has proved a necessary and salutary corrective to certain tendencies in New Historicism, especially in its more deterministic variants; but historical and cultural specificity tend to escape the grasp of ideological analysis conducted on such a level, especially insofar as such specificity relates to the diverse, heterogeneous, and often non-discursive cultural practices and processes of the social formation--what Williams called the "internal dynamic relations" of hegemonic cultures, and whose dynamics he seemed principally concerned to open up to a more broadly conceived ideological/cultural analysis.

The "historic turn" in New Historicism has a great deal of cultural or anthropological torque to it, supplied in part by cultural historians such as Natalie Davis, Robert Darnton, and Carlo Ginzburg, and symbolic and Marxist anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins, Mary Douglas, and Pierre Bourdieu. The most prominent signatures on the movement, however, are those of Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault, especially the later genealogist of power-knowledge relations. In his anti-Burckhardtian study of the social construction and constraints upon Renaissance selves, Stephen Greenblatt aligns his own project, which he calls a "poetics of culture" (Greenblatt 1980:5), with Geertz' loosely semiotic model of cultural systems of meaning:

Culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns--customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters--. . . but as a set of control mechanisms--plans, recipes, rules, instructions . . . for the governing of behavior (Geertz 1973:44).

Others have emphasized Geertz' approach to cultural practices as interpretive forms or "cultural performances" (Mullaney 1988) or his focus upon the symbolic dimensions and construction of the real (Goldberg 1983).

But as Geertz himself has acknowledged, his semiotic model of culture is hardly original to him or, in its general outlines, unique to his own brand of symbolic anthropology. As Louis Montrose suggests, the more telling Geertzian influence on New Historicism is a methodological one, an adoption and adaptation of the ethnographic practice Geertz described (Geertz 1973:3-30) as "thick description:"

To a growing number of literary critics and cultural historians at work during the later 1970's and early 1980's, what Geertz offered was perhaps less a powerful theory of culture . . . than an exemplary and eminently literary method for narrating culture in action, culture lived in the performances of individual and collective human actors. . . . Thick description seizes upon an event, performance or practice, and interrogates it in such a way as to reveal, through the interpretive narration of minute particulars, the collective ethos of an alien culture (Montrose 1990:16).

Geertz' own interpretation of cultures is not only eminently literary, however; it also tends to aestheticize the political and ideological domain,<sup>7</sup> explicating and even celebrating the cohesion of cultural meanings rather than analyzing their fragmentary and contested production, treating texts, events, and practices as collective expressions of a cultural essence or ethos rather than as ideological constructions of the collective or the essential. Describing man as "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (1973:5), Geertz traces the semantic intricacy of the web but not the social, political, or ideological intricacies--and inequities--of its spinning. "Cultures are webs of mystification as well as signification," as Roger Keesing comments, "We need to ask who creates and who defines cultural meanings, and to what end" (Keesing 1987:161-62). When Geertz describes ethnographic events as "texts," he invokes not only a semiotic but also an aesthetic model, and the aesthetics informing much of his work seems close to the formalism of literary New Criticism, which was still dominant in literary studies in the late 1960's and early 1970's (and which Geertz certainly encountered first-hand during his days as an undergraduate English major). The Balinese cockfight is an "art form" (Geertz 1973:443), and at times in Geertz' explication and appreciation of its nuances it resembles nothing so much as a literary work in the hands of a New Critic: a complex, ambiguous, but ultimately unified and coherent expression of cultural (or literary) sensibility. Keesing's critique of Geertz echoes New Historicist concerns with such formalism, New Critical and post-structuralist, in literary studies; both are

. . . silent on the way cultural meanings sustain power and privilege. .  
 . . blind to the political consequences of cultures as ideologies, their situatedness as justifications and mystifications of a local historically cumulated status quo. Where feminists and Marxists find oppression, symbolists find meaning (Keesing 1987:166).

Like a great many anthropologists indebted to Geertz but critical of such tendencies, New Historicists attempt to "synthesize cultural and Marxist (or at least politically informed) analyses" (Biersack 1989:84),<sup>8</sup> to combine, however successfully, a poetics with a politics of culture.

As Marxist critics have noted, however, New Historicist analyses of the processes through which cultural meanings are produced, systems of power and privilege sustained, negotiated, or contested, operate primarily within a synchronic field or cultural system rather than on a diachronic axis. Thus while registering its similarities with Marxism, Walter Cohen also stresses,

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<sup>7</sup>Geertz himself acknowledged this danger, warning that interpretive anthropology could all too easily become a kind of "sociological aestheticism" out of touch "with the hard surfaces of life--with the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained" (1973:30).

<sup>8</sup>Vincent Pecora suggests this is impossible in his astute analysis of the Indonesian political realities effaced in Geertz' work, and that New Historicism inevitably performs analogous effacements due to its methodological borrowings from Geertz; however, his more general comments in the essay suggest that, in his mind, his critique extends to all anthropology. See Pecora (1989).

as a fundamental difference, that "New Historicism describes historical difference, but it does not explain historical change" (1987:33). The focus upon historical difference is not a superficial trait, although it is reflected in New Historicist's characteristic penchant for the unusual, uncanny, and even bizarre historical detail--sometimes narrated as a paradoxically illustrative anecdote, oftentimes subjected to full analysis as part of a broader cultural pattern or logic. Nor is the delineation of historical difference absolute. As in Foucault's later work, New Historicist practices of defamiliarization are strategic efforts to displace traditional accounts of the past in order to clarify both similarities and differences with the present--to open up perspectives, however partial and incomplete, upon the production of historical subjects in the present and "to experience facets of our own subjection at shifting internal distances--to read, as in a refracted light, one fragment of our ideological inscription by means of another" (Montrose 1990:36; see also Mullaney 1988:xii).

Even when a considerable historical span is studied, however, as in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's impressive and influential The Poetics and Politics of Transgression, an account of the forces that precipitate or structure historical change is not forthcoming; differences in the dynamics of the bourgeois imagination or political unconscious are adeptly analyzed within historical periods ranging from the Renaissance to the modern, but as relatively discreet moments of what Norbert Elias called the "civilizing process." Needless to say, the problem is not unique to New Historicism, nor are the solutions proffered by recent critics unproblematic in themselves. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese characterizes New Historicism as one of many movements in various disciplines in which "the preoccupation with structure has given way to the preoccupation with system" (1989:218), but what she means by either term, or the possibility of a stable distinction between them, is to my mind quite questionable. New Historicism's preoccupation with system is equated with a devotion to a "notion of textuality in the large sense" which proves to be derived from American deconstruction rather than New Historicism; it is the latter for whom textuality "in the large sense" is a narrow linguistic field, and for whom "extratextual considerations defy proof and, accordingly, relevance" (Fox-Genovese 1989:218). "Structure" is a term of considerable hypostatization and difficult to pin down. At times it serves as a concept which allows one to "take account of past and present politics" (218); at other times but in a very short space, it seems to be synonymous with politics. Both draw boundaries (which a preoccupation with system somehow denies) and both govern the same forms of cultural production by means of such delineation. Thus "structure . . . governs the writing and reading of texts," but (and?) "politics draws the lines that govern the production, survival, and reading of texts and textuality" (218). However, history is also to be "understood as structure," although here structure is not a governing or boundary-drawing principle or force but rather an aggregate phenomenon, understood not as politics but as "sets or systems of relations of superordination and subordination" (221)--among which I, and I assume most New Historicists, would locate politics. As Anthony Giddens suggests, functionalist emphases on structure over system require a stable distinction between the two, a distinction impossible to maintain with social systems:

The "structure" of an organism exists "independently" of its functioning in a certain specific sense: the parts of the body can be studied when the organism dies, that is, when it has stopped "functioning." But such is not the case with social systems, which cease to exist when they

cease to function: "patterns" of social relationships only exist in so far as the latter are organized as systems, reproduced over the course of time. Hence in functionalism also, the notions of structure and system tend to dissolve into one another (Giddens 1979:61-2).

In Giddens, structure is more closely related to an Althusserian notion of ideology than to Fox-Genovese's "politics": it is set of structuring properties "understood as rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems . . . [but] temporally 'present' only in their instantiation, in the constituting moments of social systems" (1979:64). These structuring properties or rules or resources are distinct from Althusserian ideology, however, in their recursivity, the distinguishing characteristic of Giddens' concept of structuration:

The concept of structuration involves that of the duality of structure, which relates to the fundamentally recursive character of social life, and expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency. . . . the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of those social systems. The theory of structuration, thus formulated, rejects any differentiation of synchrony and diachrony or statics and dynamics. The identification of structure with constraint is also rejected: structure is both enabling and constraining (1979:69).

I dwell upon Giddens in part because he and other social theorists have recently entered into New Historicist's efforts to theorize their own practices and methods (see Montrose 1989:33n.12, and 1990:35-36), and in part because his emphasis on the constraining and enabling force of collective social structures has been a consistent focus of New Historicist work, yet has been consistently ignored or marginalized in accounts of that work. According to such accounts, which range over a wide political spectrum, from the "red scare" tactics of Pechter (1987) to the Marxist overview of Cohen (1987), New Historicism achieves a certain unanimity despite its heterogeneity. The charge is not that it revels in thickly described meaning but that it finds oppression, or cultural determination, everywhere, and denies the possibility of collective or individual agency. According to such accounts of literary studies in the 1980's, where others would find subversion, New Historicists find containment.

## II

In a 1981 essay entitled "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion," Stephen Greenblatt introduced the not-quite-binary opposition of containment and subversion. He argued that the dominant culture of early modern England did not merely allow certain forms of unruliness or discontent or subversive thought to be manifested; rather, "the very condition of power" for the Tudor state rested in its capacity to produce forms of resistance and subversion, both in order to contain them and to use them to its own ends. Although he did not say that any and all acts of resistance or subversion are

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<sup>9</sup>For an analysis and critique of Giddens, see Sewall (1989).

merely apparent, either the ruse and effect of power or the register of how fully contained the subjects of that power are--even when they think they are resisting it--he did suggest that much of what we embrace as subversive or radical in the period is, when examined more closely, not only "contained by the power it would appear to threaten . . . [but also] the very product of that power" (1985:23-24).

The essay was revised and expanded for two subsequent anthologies and most recently was included in Shakespearean Negotiations (Greenblatt 1988); it immediately prompted considerable debate and counter-argument among both New Historicists and Cultural Materialists. The reaction of the latter was an interesting one, given the stakes involved for British Marxists in making their own critical practice a form of political and ideological resistance. In the introduction to Political Shakespeare (1985), which includes an updated "Invisible Bullets," Jonathan Dollimore accepts the general criticism that apparent radicalism in the period has often been too unquestionably embraced; he finds Greenblatt's account of the production of subversion persuasive at times--especially in the extended analysis of Thomas Harriot's colonial encounters in Virginia, from which the title is taken<sup>10</sup>--but questions the scope and efficacy of such ideological management and manipulation of subjects in the period. Quite rightly, he faults the impossibly monolithic power structure that allows Greenblatt to push his argument to the extreme (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985:12), and which Greenblatt has subsequently qualified (Greenblatt 1988:2-3, 65). Generally speaking the reaction of New Historicists has been the same: ideological containment can be seen to operate in such a paradoxical and cunning fashion in some local and historically specific instances, but not as a generalized "condition" of power. "Subversion" is also a curiously loaded term, at once highly abstract and narrower in scope than one might imagine, for it apparently does not include rebellion, especially from below (Greenblatt 1988:47). As James Holstun notes,

The very concept of subversion is unsatisfactory for describing resistance or revolution. "Subversion" is more likely to be the fantasy of someone inside a dominant subculture, whether he is eager to "identify" it and root it out, or to identify with it . . . In a sense, the debate over subversion and containment is a nondebate, since "subversion" is already included in "containment" (Holstun 1989:198).

The essay provides neither a viable general theory of the operation of early modern power, a manifesto of New Historicism, nor even a template through which to read Greenblatt's other work.

Greenblatt's poetics of culture does, however, tend to obscure or homogenize a politics of culture, even when the heterogeneity of cultural forms, institutions, and practices is his primary focus. Thus in his recent study of the Shakespearean theater, focused upon the forms of cultural capital produced when objects, ideas, ceremonies, and cultural practices were

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<sup>10</sup>To explain the massive and unprecedented sickness and death that visited them along with the English, the Algonkians explained the strange fatalities by analogy to the equally strange and impressive weapons of the English, and with Harriot's encouragement attributed both the "invisible bullets" that were decimating their tribe and the visible ones the English had at their disposal to the power of the English God.

displaced or otherwise transferred from one cultural realm to another, his emphasis is upon a generalized "social energy" and, in the case of the stage, the aesthetic empowerment produced by such circulation and negotiation. The potential ideological force of such displacements from the proper to the improper is largely ignored; circulation and acquisition are key metaphors, but not appropriation (1988:10-11). The category of the aesthetic in regard to Renaissance popular drama--even, perhaps especially Shakespeare's--is itself quite problematic, given the fact that such drama was not accorded the dignity or propriety to qualify as literature or "poesy" in the period. The sites occupied by the popular playhouses--areas outside the city walls known as the Liberties--are also curiously aestheticized, described as "carefully demarcated playgrounds" (120) where the stage was "marked off openly from all other forms and ceremonies of public life precisely by virtue of its freely acknowledged fictionality" (116). Rather than neutral zones, however, the Liberties were complexly inscribed domains of cultural contradiction, ambivalence, and license; the emergence of popular drama in them was not the escape of an artform to a sheltered retreat or preserve but rather a forceful, and forcefully felt, appropriation of a highly volatile zone in the city's spatial economy--which is indeed how the city viewed the emergence of the popular theater (see Mullaney 1988:1-59; Agnew 1986). Moreover, in the sixteenth century the emergence of popular drama, as a burgeoning but far from official social phenomenon and institution, produced a sudden and explosive expansion of the discursive domain within which knowledge was produced and circulated--a domain that was at once rather contained, a relatively closed system, and not strictly governed by issues of literacy. The boundary between oral and literate cultures was highly permeable, such that ideas and ideologies were disseminated not only by direct access to the printed word but also by diverse processes of representation and re-representation, in official and unofficial forums ranging from the pulpit to the tavern, the juridical scaffold to the home or shop. Any significant expansion of this relatively closed discursive economy, any significant difference in the degree to which ideas and attitudes could be disseminated, threatened to become a difference in kind as well--altering the structure of knowledge by redefining its boundaries, contributing to the historical pressures that were forcing a transition from a relatively closed to a radically open economy of knowledge and representation. And unlike other significant expansions of the symbolic economy of the period, such as the rapid evolution of print culture and the concomitant vernacular translations of the Bible, literacy was not the price of admission to the theater, giving the stage a currency and accessibility that was rivalled only by the pulpit.

To what degree such an expansion was or could be controlled, and by what apparatuses of a far from unified or centralized state, raises the issue of power in its ideological dimension. Although a key term in New Historicist work, power is also less than adequately theorized in that work. An undeniable reliance upon Foucault's concept of power as "the multiplicity of force relations" (1978:92) in society, not primarily repressive but productive and acutely focused upon the construction of subjects and subjectivities, has led to charges that New Historicists, like Foucault, foreclose all possibility of social struggle or contestation. Focusing on Greenblatt but generalizing about New Historicism and Foucault, Frank Lentricchia argues that

[Greenblatt's] description of power endorses Foucault's theory of power, preserving not only the master's repeated insistence on the concrete institutional character of power, its palpability, as it were, but also

his glide into a conception of power that is elusively and literally indefinable--not finitely anchored but diffused from nowhere to everywhere, and saturating all social relations to the point that all conflicts and "jostlings" among social groups become a mere show of political dissension, a prearranged theater of struggle set upon the substratum of a monolithic agency which produces "opposition" as one of its delusive political effects (1989:235).

Although Lentricchia's account is clearly informed by Greenblatt's "Invisible Bullets," and relatively accurate if this were its focus, that essay is not mentioned in an otherwise comprehensive critique; rather, it supplies the terms that Lentricchia folds back into significantly different work, and this procedure produces some less than accurate characterizations, for example, of the critique of humanist notions of an autonomous self that structures Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980). Lentricchia's version of Foucault, however, is at best a substantial distortion. He not only associates Foucauldian power with a monolithic agency, which amounts to a full inversion and perversion of "the master's repeated insistence," but he also ignores Foucault's repeated assertions that a relational and contingent theory of power implies a relational and contingent theory of resistance:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always "inside" power, there is no "escaping" it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case . . . . by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. Resistances do not derive from a few heterogeneous principles; but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed (1978:95-96).

Any operation of power produces a site of potential resistance, and while Foucault emphasizes here what might be called the tactical dynamics of both--their highly volatile, localized, partial, and transitory manifestation within the social formation--these dynamics are in neither case either dispersed or dissipated. Like power, resistance comes from below, and although there is no "source of all rebellions," resistance does achieve strategic force as well: "it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state

relies on the institutional integration of power relationships" (Foucault 1978:96).<sup>11</sup>

Criticizing traditional concepts of power for their emphasis on a centralized and repressive force operating from above, Foucault once suggested that "we have still not cut off the head of the king" (1978:88-89). Working in a period when the sovereign corpus was still quite literally intact, Renaissance New Historicists have necessarily but sometimes too exclusively focused upon monarchical power, oftentimes relying on Foucault's argument that an "economy of visibility" structured the power of the sovereign (1977:187) to emphasize that royal power existed only insofar as it manifested itself, that it was, in a sense, theatrically conceived, produced, negotiated, and maintained. To what degree the royal aura created and projected in monarchical processions, rituals of authority ranging from coronation ceremonies to public executions, the carefully managed dissemination of royal portraits and proclamations, succeeded in fostering "an effective internalization of obedience" (James 1988:358), and how such efforts were enhanced or contested in unofficial discursive and representational forums, has been the subject of wide opinion and disagreement. Greenblatt suggests that dramatic representations of monarchy on stage were, however corrosive or subversive in appearance, implicated in and contained by "the English form of absolutist theatricality" which structured monarchical power (1988:65), but this view has been criticized for conflating distinctly different manifestations of Renaissance "theatricality." Royal pageantry and ritual relied upon the presentation of authority, the unique royal presence, rather than its representation; or rather, who is representing and what is being represented need to coincide in the figure of the monarch, and the proper interpellation of the subject depends upon the aura generated by this carefully preserved and controlled synthesis of image and identity. Theatrical representation, however, radically splits image and identity. Working with sixteenth-century theories of the monarchical corpus--the king's two bodies--some have even argued that even in apparently royalist plays the effect of bringing a monarch on the dramatic scaffold, a royal figure played by a lower class actor in borrowed robes, was inherently corrosive--that theatrical representation dismantled and derogated the carefully maintained and quasi-mystical aura of monarchical power, not simply by reproducing it but by rendering it reproducible (Moretti 1982; Kastan 1986; Mullaney 1989).

If it is misleading to collapse theatrical representation into the "theatricality" of sovereign power, it is equally misleading to take at face value the pretensions and mystifications of sovereign presentation. In his study of the politics of literature in Jacobean England, Jonathan Goldberg draws on both Derrida and Foucault to examine the enabling contradictions of rule under James I and the degree to which poets and playwrights appropriated the radically equivocal style of Jacobean absolutism to position and sustain themselves both within and outside of the court patronage system (Goldberg 1983). The poetics and politics of Elizabethan rule have been richly and influentially examined by Louis Montrose in a series of essays that in many ways stand as exemplary instances of New Historicist methodology and practice. Drawing on a wide variety of materials ranging from royal processions and proclamations to the fantasies and dreams of Elizabethan (male) subjects, Montrose provides a richly nuanced account of ways in which Elizabeth

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<sup>11</sup>I am using tactical and strategic in the sense developed by Michel de Certeau (1984:xviii-xx).

maintained her tenuous position as the female ruler of a patriarchal state, eliding the vulnerability of her own power with the vulnerability of gender and turning them both to her own advantage, styling herself as the unattainable, hence endlessly pursued, Virgin Queen, appropriating aspects of the Marian cult and the conventions of pastoral romance to restructure and manage the shape of her subjects' sexual as well as political desires. The analysis of the symbolic forms of mediation Elizabeth managed so dexterously does not preclude but rather implies and opens the way for Montrose's examination of the social, political, and material realities mystified in the process (see esp. Montrose 1980a, 1983a, 1983b, 1986b). Elizabethan literary works are viewed as integral and active forces in a complex process of cultural production, engaging in sometimes contestatory negotiations with and productions of Elizabethan culture, oftentimes in manner that clarifies the male anxieties that structure and motivate traditional and historically conjunctural gender hierarchies (Montrose 1983). Drawing explicitly on Raymond Williams' cultural theory, Montrose argues for a notion of ideology that is "heterogeneous and unstable, permeable and processual" (1989:22), and for a relationship between structure and subject that is both dynamic and recursive, a mutually constitutive process in which agency is neither foreclosed nor unconstrained. What he calls the "process of subjectification" is an equivocal one,

on the one hand, shaping individuals as loci of consciousness and initiators of action--endowing them with subjectivity and with the capacity for agency; and, on the other hand, positioning, motivating, and constraining them within--subjecting them to--social networks and cultural codes that ultimately exceed their comprehension or control (1989:21).

For Montrose, this process of subjectification is also inescapably gender-specific, an engendering of historical subjects and subjectivities. His work with the figure of Elizabeth and the attendant cultural materials he brings to bear upon her reign have charted terrain that is in many ways crucial<sup>12</sup> to an historically-informed analysis of the Renaissance sex-gender system.

Although issues of gender have been a recurrent concern in New Historicism, the relationship of the movement to feminist literary criticism is at best an evolving one. Its emergence to a position of some prominence in the early 1980's was viewed by some feminist critics with justifiable alarm and suspicion; at a juncture when feminists had begun to carve out a niche for themselves within the academy, a new movement was being embraced by the profession as something like the latest fad, threatening to displace and marginalize feminist studies and reconstruct them, in retrospect, as a passing fashion as well. That the movement in question tended to subordinate questions of gender to those of power only exacerbated suspicion. In Renaissance studies in the early 1980's--that is, the period(s) of New Historicism's emergence--feminist literary criticism was itself in a state of significant transition, or rather on the verge of such a transition. In 1980, the two most significant publications in Renaissance studies were Stephen

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<sup>12</sup>Judith Lowder Newton, for example, while critical of certain occlusions of the material realm in the work of Catherine Gallagher, Nancy Armstrong, and Mary Poovey, finds that Montrose has begun to integrate the material and the symbolic realms; see Newton (1989).

Greenblatt's Renaissance Self-Fashioning and The Woman's Part, a collection of feminist essays on Shakespeare edited by Carolyn Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Neely which in many ways put the feminist study of Shakespeare on the map of literary studies. The theoretical ferment of Marxist, post-structuralist, and feminist theory in the mid- to late 1970's is not significantly reflected in The Woman's Part, however. Centered on the interpretation of images of women in plays and strongly psychoanalytic in its approach to them--and influenced by American rather than French variants of psychoanalytic theory--the volume codified the advances of the first wave of feminist criticism in this country, but at a time when a second wave was already developing (see Cohen 1987:22-26; Erickson 1985). British materialist feminists were in particular critical of what they viewed as an ahistorical approach to Renaissance women and dramatic characters, of a tendency to treat the latter as though they were the former, and of the essentializing model of the self applied to both (see Jardine 1983). A more materialist and historically-informed feminist criticism has been emerging in this country in recent years, partially in reaction to such critiques and partially as a separate evolution of feminist literary criticism, and is evident in the work of scholars such as Jean Howard, Karen Newman, Laura Levine, and others. Such work by both American and British feminists (see esp. Belsey 1985; Callaghan 1989; McKluskie 1989) has been influenced by New Historicism and has also provided salutary and influential critiques of certain New Historicist tendencies. Gender in such work is historically situated, not subordinated to an amorphous concept of power but no longer the exclusive category of analysis; rather, it is inscribed within a complex nexus of class, gender, and race hierarchies. New Historicism has not become, as some feared, the latest orthodoxy, nor has it died away. To my mind, the record of recent years suggest it has been part of a productive, polyvocal, far from harmonious but necessary dialogue with Materialist Feminism, Cultural Materialism, and other participants in the broader field of cultural studies.

### III

The need for a more materialist apprehension of historical heterogeneity confronts New Historicism as well. In one of the more cogent critiques of the movement, James Holstun (like many others) records his dissatisfaction with the various manifestations of a "will-to-totalization" in New Historicist approaches to culture. Unlike others, however, he neither attributes such totalizing tendencies to a submerged metaphysical or political agenda nor does he pretend to offer or have in his own pocket a model of cultural criticism that does not "explicitly or implicitly work from some model of cultural totality" (Holstun 1989:198). Rather, he suggests that New Historicism attributes an overly logical structure to culture--as, I would add, do both Geertz and Foucault, although in very different ways--that licenses its persistent return to canonical literary works, situated as privileged texts where cultural pressures, forces, and practices are more complexly and revealingly coded than elsewhere. The problem is not that New Historicism totalizes culture, but that it

totalizes prematurely by arguing that all cultural conflicts, all exercises of power and resistance necessarily register themselves inside canonical cultural artifacts. This sort of argument assumes that

culture is a logical structure that can be captured by an artwork forming a structure homologous to it. A view of culture as a material entity, on the other hand, studies the relation between the way a subculture articulates itself and the way it is articulated by another subculture (Holstun 1989:198-99).

Holstun is concerned in particular with the radical pamphlet literature of the English revolution and the lack of attention devoted to such material, taken as evidence of "oppositional collective self-fashioning" (1989:209), by New Historicists, despite all their talk of subversion or resistance or containment. He returns us to Raymond Williams, with a little help from Christopher Hill.

New Historicism can hardly be accused of ignoring non-canonical texts, literary or otherwise, or of translating oftentimes-compensatory articulations of dominant ideologies into the world-view of a period. Nor has it been blind to the fundamental problematics that confront any socio-historical analysis. History is accessible to us only in the textual traces recorded and preserved in the past, whether those traces take the form of a play or a poem, a medical treatise or political pamphlet, a census of births and deaths or a register of litigation. The process of recording and preservation is at once incomplete and partial in a different, ideological sense of the term. Even when one acknowledges that the historical archive is incomplete and fragmentary, reading documents from that archive merely as records or reflections of past reality raises the danger of reinscribing and reproducing the ideological agendas served by their original preservation. Such documents, as Dominick LaCapra has suggested, "are themselves historical realities that do not simply represent but also supplement the realities to which they refer, and a critical reading of them may provide insight into cultural processes" (LaCapra 1985:62). In its efforts to gain such insights, New Historicism has not restricted itself to the articulate and articulated consciousness of the culture in question, but has sought to combine the critical analysis of such discursive records with the interpretive reconstruction, however fragmentary and even hypothetical, of more implicit, less codified modes of thought and action--to attend, in Anthony Giddens' terms, to both the discursive consciousness of the period (defined as that "knowledge which actors are able to express on the level of discourse") and to the more heterogeneous realm of its practical consciousness (understood as those "tacit stocks of knowledge which actors draw upon in the constitution of social activity" [Giddens 1979:5]). However, it has tended to homogenize the latter, and here Holstun's critique is especially apt, and appropriate not only for the period of the English revolution.

Given the nature of the Reformation in sixteenth-century England and what we know of the combinatory (il)logic with which people processed the various and competing knowledges available to them, we should be especially wary of prematurely imposing an order upon those traces of practical consciousness we can derive from recorded events and documentary evidence of whatever kind. The English Reformation progressed, if that is the right term, in a manner more conducive to cultural schizophrenia than to unquestioned political and religious orthodoxy. A man or woman reaching maturity in Henry VIII's early reign and fully accessible to ideological interpellation might well have been confused in his or her identity, having been, in the course of relatively few years, a loyal Roman Catholic, an Henrician Catholic, a Protestant--first moderate and then more radical in Edward's later reign--then a Catholic again (and a "bloody" one to boot), then some variety of

Anglican or Elizabethan Protestant. For that presumably significant portion of the population that did not embrace each succeeding state religion with equal fervor, the displacement of one orthodoxy by another, each claiming unrivaled status as absolute truth, must have decentered and destabilized the very notion of the absolute, producing a skeptical if not cynical relativism even among the lower classes. "What manner of religion we have in England I know not," declared William Binkes, a tailor from Finchingfield, in 1577, "for the preachers now do preach their own inventions and fantasies, and therefore I will not believe any of them" (Emmison 1970:46). Such frank and radical religious skepticism needs to be coupled with evidence that occasionally surfaces in court records of the inventive delight taken, especially by the lower classes, in appropriating fragments of knowledge from discrete and quite different discursive realms and combining them to produce their own bricolage theories of state and church, God and man (or woman). Working from records of the Italian inquisition, Carlo Ginzburg has provided a rich account of such an irreverent appropriation and assimilation of orthodox and heterodox ideas in the case of a Friulian miller named Menocchio (Ginzburg 1980); although Ginzburg's study does not provide the evidence he claims, of a primordial, oral, popular culture that is fully autonomous from dominant or ruling hegemonies, it does provide a rather full view of a practice of ideological bricolage that we catch partial glimpses of elsewhere, and one which we should be wary of folding back in to an ordered cultural logic, whether the period's own or one we have artfully and thickly described.

Even where official manifestations of royal power are concerned, there is ample evidence that what might be called the intended illocutionary force of such power in operation could have an unintended illocutionary effect. Lacking the bureaucracy necessary for the policing and surveillance of its populace, early modern England was forced to rely upon a system of exemplary justice, of public and oftentimes spectacular punishment, that sought to instill the proper degree of awe and fear in the minds of its subjects. Even so eminent a figure as Sir Edward Coke was forced to recognize, however, that such a system was at best inadequate to the task--if not contrary to it:

We have found by wooll experience that it is not frequent and often punishment that doth prevent like offenses . . . . Those offenses are often committed that are often punished, for the frequency of the punishment makes it so familiar as it is not feared (cited in Skulsky 1964:157).

Punishment makes familiar both the crime and its consequences, but with a crucial difference. Frequent punishment advertises the taboo or the forbidden as a common occurrence, and at the same time inures its audience to the spectacle of the law taking hold of and inscribing itself upon the body of the condemned. Exemplary power not only fails to deter, it even produces and promulgates the very transgressions it acts upon--by the sheer fact that it must act upon them, giving them a currency or circulation they would not otherwise possess. What Coke confronts is not a general "undecidability" of meaning or juridical effect but rather a paradoxical unpredictability and overdetermination of affect, and one that suggests crucial dimensions to any effort to come to grips with the production and control of historical meaning and subjects. Cultural production is never a one-way street. Exemplary displays of power, like official and unofficial disseminations of ideas, images, even "facts," enter into a cultural economy that is inherently dialogical; once placed into circulation, any cultural practice, text, or

representation is available for and subject to appropriation, for both licit and illicit ends.

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