**Measure for Measure, New Historicism, and Theatrical Power**

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The present paper is an intervention into the current debate in Renaissance studies on the so-called "new historicism," a movement sufficiently widespread that it neither needs nor can be contained by a simple definition. Sessions at the MLA, at various regional conferences, and at the three latest Shakespeare Association of America conferences, on topics such as "new politics," or "Shakespeare and Political Criticism," not to mention a spate of new anthologies and a pronounced increase in professional mobility all testify to the dominance of the historicist movement. (Its complement in Britain, cultural materialism, has not, despite its name, been doing so well in a strictly material sense—though it, too, is reaching toward the status of a kind of orthodoxy.) Since new historicism has achieved a position of professional dominance, and since, further, it has been adumbrated specifically in reference to Renaissance literature as a social practice, it seems suitable to take a step backwards and glance at some of the cultural relations of this particular critical practice. (I should, perhaps, add that the first version of this paper was written for a seminar on gender and power at the Berlin World Shakespeare Congress in 1986, chaired by Lisa Jardine and Carol Thomas Neely, one that included several of the most prominent exponents of new historicism. The occasion provoked me to adopt a mildly contestatory, polemical stance, which in any event registered my response to a baptismal immersion in the waters of the new history that I had allowed myself the previous year. I had read, and I wrote, as a non-participant [an ex-formalist no longer so fascinated by metadrama and the play of theatrical illusion] on the lookout for a different critical home. I was impressed by the power of much of this work, but at the same time I found myself scotched by skepticism at several turns.)

The question that I want to explore has to do with the new historicists' conception of power, its relation to the possibility of subversion or resistance (perhaps the most contested issue in the ongoing debate), and its source in the present political and academic milieu. In seeking to situate new historicism as a form of discourse, I do no more than its practitioners do in relation to the work of writers such as Shakespeare, Spenser, or Puttenham. Beyond that, I want at the end of my discussion to focus on Measure for Measure as I seek to put new historicism as a mode of interpretation into antithetical relation to current theatrical practice, an especially fruitful antithesis given new historicism's alertness to the subtleties inherent in the theatrical deployment of power.

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1) This paper deals mostly with American forms of historicism. I have discussed some examples of British cultural materialism, a somewhat different movement, in relation especially to *The Tempest* in "Tempest in a Teapot" in "Bad Shakespeare*, ed. Maurice Charney (forthcoming from Associated University Presses).
A curious feature of a good deal of historicist criticism is that, despite its call for a return to history and its attempt to insert literature into history, it has often, especially in its North American manifestations, seemed oddly ahistorical. As the "textuality of history" becomes a fixed law, and one closely attended to by literary critics (whose business after all is to interpret texts), how suited to literary interpretation does "history" become? To make history a text certainly makes it manageable, especially for critics. (This is not to say that it makes history simple or transparent, as it putatively was for older historicisms—but what critic wants a simple, transparent text to interpret?) But it also makes history strangely atemporal, a spatial form subject to literary investigation (and here the rejected formalist roots of historicist analyses sometimes become manifest, as they do also in the attachment to the very form of the critical essay itself). A symptom of this tendency is the deployment of the historical anecdote, or "illustrative example," in new historical critical essays, where "history," as represented by the example, becomes what the essay puts into relation with the literary text(s) under discussion. The whole configuration (example and text) is then analyzed to yield the interpretation that one could argue has put anecdote and text together in the first place. Carol Thomas Neely has suggested that "taking Tillyard as their primary scapegoat, making him stand as the representative of almost four hundred years of liberal-humanist critical illusions . . . frees cult-historicists to recuperate the Elizabethan world picture." Pictures, we should note, are spatial, and they don't change. It is true that the new world picture is more complex than the old, more riven by contradiction, but it has a similar totalizing effect; it makes culture synchronic, rendering history open to literary critical interpretation by withdrawing it from time and hence from change. Given its theoretical preconceptions, that is, new historicism has some difficulty accounting for historical change.

2 Louis Adrian Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History," English Literary Renaissance, 16 (1986) 1, 5–12, esp. p. 8. Montrose's essay was also presented to the Berlin seminar for which this piece was originally written.


4 There is thus a danger of circular argumentation. The essay that Stephen Greenblatt contributed to the Berlin Congress seminar on gender and power, "Fiction and Friction," provides a possible example, although the question is a tricky one. (The essay has been widely circulated in manuscript and has been published in different versions in Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought, eds. Thomas E. Heller, et al. [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986], pp. 30–52, and in Greenblatt's Shakespearean Negotiations [Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1988], pp. 66–93.) In it Greenblatt argues that "we must historicize Shakespearean sexual nature," and uses a well-chosen anecdote about a French hermaphrodite to illustrate his point. The problem is that to deploy the narrative in such a way seems to be producing the very history that the paper argues is necessary to historicize "sexual nature."


6 Some of the above points are considered in Jean Howard's excellent and thorough article (cited in note 3), in which she welcomes the advances made by the shift to historical study; challenges the newness of it in some ways; suggests reasons why it has caught on in relation especially to Renaissance studies; outlines the assumptions of such criticism ("that man is a construct, not an essence" and "that the historical investigator is likewise a product of his history," leading to the view that "history" cannot be used as an unproblematic ground for stabilizing the literary text [pp. 23–24]); and describes her "main reservation about much of this work," that is, its "failure to reflect on itself" (p. 31). She analyzes the work of Montrose and Greenblatt, comments that "what is needed . . . is an extended discussion of subversion and contestation" (p. 35), and ques-
Some new historicist readings of Measure for Measure, to move now towards the main subject of my essay, have attempted to recuperate the imposition of power in that play, particularly in relation to the Duke. Leonard Tennenhouse, for example, sees Measure as a projection of an early Jacobean "collective fantasy," one that involves a subterfuge. Though in plays like Measure and Marston's The Malcontent the state appears to be on its own, functioning independently despite the absence of the monarch, such plays, he argues, "discover what they would like to have us believe is a law of nature, that only the true monarch is the best form of political power." In his Power on Display: The politics of Shakespeare's genres, Tennenhouse states his premise more overtly, while making the same basic point: "Given that the existence of the theater depended upon serving the interests of monarchy, it is . . . likely that dramas [in particular those featuring absent monarchs] were staged to remain constant to their purpose of authorizing the monarch in the face of a new political challenge." Franco Moretti uses different terms, but he too sees Measure for Measure as in unproblematic service of the monarch; for him, the repositioning of authority in Vienna, especially the undoing of Angelo's criminal acts, recreates "society . . . as theatre"—i.e., as a reenactment of prescribed roles with the sovereign as director—and thus realizes "the ideal of every restoration culture: to abolish the irreversibility of history and render the past everlasting."

Moretti refers to Measure for Measure as a "de-problematizing" play, but I am inclined to guard my perhaps old-fashioned notion of this text as problematic. The current historical moment may indeed encourage attempts to see Measure for Measure as legitimizing the imposition of centralized power, even among those who are wary of such tendencies in our own polity. In fact, being wary is likely to make it seem all the more necessary to expose the subterfuges of power, so that the act of interpretation becomes explicitly political, de-mystifying not just the power of forms, not just the canonical authority of Shakespeare himself, but the ways of power in general. Such a critical attitude strikes a double blow—first at the formalist and humanist conception of Shakespeare as, par excellence, the poet without or beyond ideology, and second at the mechanisms of power in society, Jacobean or Reaganite. For such critics Shakespeare becomes an ideologue, consciously or unconsciously serving the interests of centralized patriarchal authority—or at least his text becomes com-


9 "A Huge Eclipse: Tragic Form and the Deconsecration of Sovereignty," in The Power of Forms, pp. 7–40, esp. pp. 20, 23. Though he himself is not strictly a new historicist, Moretti's essay takes a similar line and appears in one of the initiating volumes of the movement.
licit and ideological. However, those seeking to restore the Duke, a notoriously slippery character, to the top of the play’s ideological ladder, may in fact be seeking an authoritative place for their own discourse. The restoration is, of course, done not in the interest of Jacobean ideology (that is the “old” historicism) but in order to demystify it. But while the Duke’s power is demystified, the power of the critical interpretation that puts him in place is not. Ironically, the critical practice that thus perceives the Shakespearean text as ideological is oddly similar to that which sees Shakespeare as above ideology; in both views, the aim of the interpreter is partly to liberate the text’s consumers in the interests of liberal-humanist values, most especially the value of freedom, although, in the former case, this thrust toward liberation goes, paradoxically, directly against the theory of ideological containment.

There is an intriguing passage at the end of Stephen Greenblatt’s chapter on Othello in Renaissance Self-Fashioning, in which the possibility of freedom is addressed: “In Shakespeare’s narrative art, liberation from the massive power structures that determine social and psychic reality [with which the book has been largely concerned] is glimpsed in an excessive aesthetic delight, an erotic embrace of those very structures—the embrace of a Desdemona whose love is more deeply unsettling than even a[n] Iago’s empathy.” This has the ring of a Marcusian vision, civilization’s discontents reversed by the power of eros, except that in an amazing transformation (going well beyond Barthes’s jouissance) the object of erotic desire has become a text, and not just Shakespeare’s text but a whole textual system, the “totality of signifying practices by which Elizabethan life was articulated,” as Louis Montrose succinctly puts it. This seems to me an effort on Greenblatt’s part to write his way out of the trap defined in a corollary essay and implied throughout Renaissance Self-Fashioning. “There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us.” That comment, re-casting Kafka’s “There is hope, no end of hope, only not for us,” cuts two ways: 1) power “contains” subversion—it breeds it and makes it a part of itself; and 2) we, as interpreters, can only identify subversion somewhere else and, as we do so, recognize it as a part of power—there is no subversion at home, as it were. No wonder, then, that a vision of excessive sexual-textual pleasure arises as an antidote. If we make love to our employment, perhaps we can escape the implacable totality of textualized power relations. But even this effort to implant subversiveness is bound, by Greenblatt’s very principle, to be contained by the reigning hegemony.

This development is significant in itself, but becomes even more so if we situate it in California, in the 1980s, in the academy. The social conditions out of which ideas arise are clearly of fundamental importance, and I therefore

10 See, for example, Josephine Waters Bennett, Measure for Measure as Royal Entertainment (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966).
11 It is interesting to note in this connection the related paradox that Shakespeare is being simultaneously unseated and re-enthroned, “re-canonized,” as Carol Thomas Neely puts it (see note 5 above).
12 Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 254. This brilliant and influential book is of course the crucial text in the development of new historicism.
find it revealing that so many of the initiators and practitioners of new historicism are California-based or -trained. It is in California where the contradictions and polarities of American society are most visible, where, for example, the promise of the freed self held out by groups like Esalen Institute and EST is cancelled by the specter of Ronald Reagan and the new right. (I use these images as convenient shorthand for the contradictions raised by the term “California”; readers are invited to supply their own examples.) As for the academy, the North American university system has an astonishing capacity to incorporate the subversive, just as American power in general has the capacity to absorb and neutralize opposing voices. If feminism, for example, challenges the patriarchal authority of academic discourse and administration, then feminists are hired by prestigious universities and thereby made part of the authority that they sought to subvert. In such cases, there is certainly no subversion “for us.” Add to this the swing to conservatism and authoritarianism characteristic of the ’80s, and it should be no surprise that theories about the inescapability of power are promulgated with some urgency in such a context.

II

Louis Montrose’s work situates Elizabethan writing within (to quote once again) the “totality of signifying practices by which Elizabethan life was articulated, the totality of forms in which it was lived.” He seems less concerned with liberation-subversion than Greenblatt, and in fact argues powerfully that all texts are implicated dialectically in power relations, and that at least some Elizabethan texts (A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Araygnement of Paris, for example) create, or re-create, the culture by which they are created. He insists that the conflicts and contradictions he explores are culture-specific, and thus seems disinclined to move himself as interpreter into his discourse, as Greenblatt sometimes does. Montrose gives us a rigorous and compelling dialectical analysis of Elizabethan play as work, as a form of negotiation (under “coulor of otiation” as Puttenham puts it) that involves courtiers, poets, and playwrights as contestants with the prince for author-ity. Still, it seems to me possible and even fruitful to locate Montrose’s project within a present-day politics whereby his own texts also contest authority, most especially that of older historicisms and the humanist assumptions that they embrace—in particular “the freedom and autonomy of the individual subject” and the view that art is “non-purposive.” His critique of O. B. Hardison exemplifies the process of generational conflict that is one of the themes of Montrose’s analysis of Elizabethan literature—repeated now within the arena of academic discourse: “Because Hardison’s text is written from within the boundaries of the very ideology whose historical emergence is its own subject, it cannot but misrecognize that process as the emergence of an objective truth.” From this well-justified attack on an historicism that assumes that both its own humanist principles and the literature that it studies are free of ideological taint, Montrose proceeds to a telltale conclusion: “The ‘boundaries’ of which Hardison writes,


16 See “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds,” p. 452, and “Shaping Fantasies,” p. 86.

17 “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds,” p. 449.

boundaries within which literature can be ‘free,’ have been produced by a specific sociohistorical development, and they are boundaries that it has become the business of criticism to police.”

In this context, Montrose’s work becomes clearly an act of resistance, a bid for liberation from the power of the academic police and the ideology they serve. Is it at the same time a part of power, a subversion contained by power, to use Greenblatt’s terms? That’s a question I’m not sure how to answer, and which I don’t find answered in Montrose’s text. Given his own assumptions, acts of genuine resistance would seem to be impossible (unless perhaps they are theatrical acts, with all that implies) and are therefore not strictly coherent, or thinkable, within the system he adumbrates. Recently, however, he has begun to focus on ambivalence as a way out of the logjam. In a 1986 essay on Spenser, he explicitly, though tentatively, distinguishes his own position from Greenblatt’s: “the male/poet/subject may appear to be constructed not in an unequivocal act of self-devotion to the embodiment of the state [i.e., an hypostatized Power] but instead in the very tension between his impulse to worship and his internal resistance to such an impulse.”

Interestingly, the language Montrose uses in this section of his essay strongly suggests that the configuration of Spenser’s ambivalent relationship to Elizabeth (both subject to and contesting with) is reproduced in Montrose’s own discursive relationship with Greenblatt, his critical “other.” Clearly, then, there are analogies between Montrose’s work-play and the play-work of his Elizabethan courtier-poets, analogies that generate paradoxical positions.

One way of putting what I have been trying to say is that for critics like Greenblatt, Tennenhouse, and Montrose, there are still liberal remnants of humanistic belief in the values of freedom and resistance, despite the fact that such a belief seems to be precluded by their critical position. The tyranny of the Elizabethan signifying system, along with the tyranny of academic claims to truth, has been exposed only to be replaced by the tyranny of textuality itself. And this new hegemony rankles, inducing gestures of resistance, however wayward and theoretically unjustified.

Let me turn for a minute to the issue of censorship. Greenblatt argues that Elizabethan censorship existed to make certain that this containment of the radical doubts produced by the theatre functioned properly. What I don’t understand about this, in the context of the argument that the production of subversion is the very condition of power, is just how the containment could fail to function properly. If censorship was necessary, and from the point of view of the authorities it clearly was, then this fact alone suggests that there were rifts and faults in the apparently seamless strata of power, and suggests further that the argument about containment simply doesn’t hold. On this point I am

20 See “The Purpose of Playing,” Helios, 7 (1980), 51–74, and “Shaping Fantasies,” though the implications are far from clear. What exactly is theatrical activity and what does it do? How is enactment, theatricality, on a stage different from a monarchical theatre? Is play itself a form of resistance? These are questions that need to be addressed directly by new historicist discourse but are often skirted. See Howard, especially pp. 34–35.
22 A related point is made by Jean Howard when she speaks of Greenblatt’s “lingering nostalgia for studying individual lives, for mystifying the idea of personal autonomy” (p. 37).
23 “Invisible Bullets,” p. 45.
more in agreement with an essay of Montrose's, written, I think, before most of the ones I have been citing and less inclined to totalizing strategies, in which he suggests that the theatre posed a social and spiritual challenge to established authority—though even there he comments, in seeming contradiction to his main argument, "If the Privy Council and the Court nourished the professional drama, it was because it served their own interests." 24 Censorship is a blunt instrument, partly because of the obtuseness of the officials who impose it and the cleverness of those who oppose it, partly because of the slipperiness of language itself. Thus, even within a heavily censored milieu, a theatre can contrive to be deeply and subversively resistant to the power that seeks to control it (as has been seen, for example, in parts of eastern Europe over the past thirty years or so). Of course what may have been true at other times and places may not have been true in Elizabethan England, especially given the very different apparatus at work, with its emphasis on the theatricality of power itself. 25 But just because power defines itself theatrically doesn't necessarily mean that every theatrical act is a part of power—which we redefine power in terms less monolithic and total, as Foucault seems to be trying to do in, for example, *The History of Sexuality*, where he speaks of power as a network with points of resistance. 26

In order to extend and complicate the notion of power, it might be useful here to invoke Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony," by which he means the spread of control on the part of a dominant class or political society through the agency of consent. 27 Cultural production in such a view may be and often is part of the hegemonic apparatus by which a state obtains and maintains consent. But equally the possibility of counter-hegemonic activity exists—indeed is inseparable as one group or class seeks to extend its consensual hold (its hegemony) over members of that class and then seeks alliances with other groups and segments of "civil" society. It is even possible that a political theory cognizant of Gramsci might help to free new historicism from some of its most disabling concepts. Reading Foucault in an essentially conservative way that legitimates a narrow and paralyzing notion of power tends to trap new historicists into resisting or ignoring the possibility of change. Since Gramsci defined his theory as one of praxis and sought ways to understand hegemony in the


25 Stephen Orgel's work has been influential in establishing this idea. See, for example, *The Illusion of Power* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975) and "Making Greatness Familiar" in *The Power of Forms*, pp. 41–48. For a full discussion of censorship and its relation to literary production in the period, see Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

26 "Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it? . . . Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the reuse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. . . . points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. . . . there is a plurality of resistances. . . . But this does not mean that they are only a reaction . . . doomed to perpetual defeat. . . . neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed" (*The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, 2 vols., trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage, 1980], pp. 95–96).

27 Here the key text is Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, available in English in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). As a map to this huge and amorphous work, I have found very useful Walter Adamson's *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1980). The sense of "hegemony" as I use it here is the main, but not the only, meaning that Gramsci gives the term. See *Selections from the Notebooks*, p. xiv, and *Hegemony and Revolution*, pp. 9–11, 170 ff.
context of actual historical struggle, his views ought to be taken into account and ought to be taken seriously. For him, hegemony is always consensual, and hence subject to challenge, disruption, and change. As such it is opposed to domination (rule without consent), clearly a more vulnerable if also more tyrannical kind of regime. New historicism, I would claim, tends to hypostatize "power" without drawing the important distinction between hegemony and domination.

Gramsci viewed the reading and writing of history as "present politics in the making"; he had no more illusion about pure unmediated history than do contemporary historicists who base their skepticism on poststructuralist theories of textuality and representation. For Gramsci, to write history was "to grasp present political issues in the fullness of their historical development," and also to make a political move in the present by analyzing similar situations in the past.\(^{28}\) If new historicism is to remain viable, it would seem to me that it must stop ignoring the political uses to which it puts history, and one way of doing this would be to recognize in Renaissance culture the essentially hegemonic role of cultural production. That texts may be competing for hegemony; that alliances between cultural groups are being formed or sought; that, instead of individual courtier-poet competition, counter-hegemonies are perhaps being formed—or, if not, that such individual competitiveness may be a part of the hegemony of the dominant classes; that, finally, "theatrical" power might be put to radically opposed uses—all of these possibilities need to be considered.

III

And here we come back, after an admittedly circuitous route, to the issue of Measure for Measure and the problem it poses—which is precisely one of the theatrics of power. The Duke gains power by giving it away, finding political authority less effective than theatrical manipulation. If King James maintains his authority by being theatrical (as Tennenhause, Stephen Orgel, and others suggest\(^{29}\)), how deft to extend the logic and make the player-Duke into a Duke-player lurking in dark corners, looking for his chance to usurp even the power of the playwright and write the script himself. The often-noted autonomy of the first half of the play gives way suddenly to the second half’s dependence on its actor-monarch-director. The argument that Shakespeare’s bid for his own power and that of his medium is at stake in the construction of his dramas is neatly illustrated by this set-up.\(^{30}\) The ruler (Vincentio-James) has his revenge on the dramatist-usurper (Shakespeare) by himself becoming a playwright (Duke as manipulator) and taking over the play; but of course he was only a player-Duke in the first place, set in motion by the dramatist, so

\(^{28}\) Adamson, p. 183.

\(^{29}\) James I’s (and Elizabeth’s) by now well-known statements to the effect that, as James wrote, ‘‘Kings being publike persons, by reason of their office and authority, are as it were set . . . upon a publike stage’’ are often quoted in this regard. See Tennenhause, Power on Display, pp. 155 and 190, and, for other examples, Stephen Orgel, The Illusion of Power, pp. 42–43, and Jonathan Goldberg, James I and the Politics of Literature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 113–14, 177.

Shakespeare wins the bout. If theatre’s what you want (or are), says the player to the king, then we can do it better than you.

But how does the Duke’s power actually assert itself? The heavy-handedness, the moral ambiguity, the hesitations and confusions of the Duke’s practice have been noted so often that there is no need to go over them here. Greenblatt comments in passing on Measure for Measure’s “open, sustained and radical questioning” of authority, “before it is reaffirmed, with ironic reservations, at the close.”31 This seems to me a more acceptable formulation than the tidier but monolithic conception in Tennenhouse’s work. But where the ironic reservations stop and the reaffirmation begins is open to question. I’ll confine myself primarily to a few comments on the last scene.

That final scene is remorselessly public, imposing a theatrically authoritative solution on a complex situation at the level of both genre and politics. But the theatrical flourish of power is demystified by its inappropriate application—sexual relations and secrets, the private writing whose inscriptions the play’s language has so forcefully registered, become a matter of crude public reading (and misreading) within a theatrical context engineered by the writing Duke. Sexual politics earlier in the play, especially in regard to Angelo, has been frequently imaged as a form of inscription, men writing on women; given that, the public charactery read aloud in the final scene confers authority and sanction on Angelo’s previous activity. The Duke’s theatrical writing becomes a public version of Angelo’s sexual writing, the two kinds of questionable author-ity mirroring each other.

The woman as “credulous to false prints” (II.iv.130), as being coined and written on (“‘The stealth of our most mutual entertainment / With character too gross is writ on Juliet’” [I.ii.154–55]), is a recurring image for sexuality in the play. Sex makes her readable, her body carrying a written message. (It’s interesting how many pregnancies there are in the margins of this dark comedy.) This image is part of a larger system that refers to reading, writing, communicating, and coming to know, a network linking the double meanings of the ubiquitous puns and making sex ambiguously semiotic.32 One of the problems Justice faces in the play is precisely that of “knowing,” a fact that underlines the difficulties involved in seizing what is “open made” to it. The complex relations among sex, language, knowledge, and the law are comically invoked in the scene involving Elbow’s wife, a character who never appears in the play but whose pregnancy, like those of Kate Keepdown (who doesn’t appear either) and Juliet, is the most distinctive thing about her. She is defined chiefly by her desire for stewed prunes, but that simple desire leads to a tangle of contradictory and vagrant meanings. (She is both known and not known.) The scene makes comic hay out of the judicial procedures on which both Angelo and Escalus depend for the clarity of their legal determinations. The obscure proposal made to Elbow’s wife is of course repeated at a more threatening level in the Angelo-Isabella scenes that follow, culminating in II.iv where Angelo uses verbal and sexual authority to proceed toward his desire, his knowledge. Both the Elbow scene and the later blackmail scene are marked by parody of legal language, by sexual puns whose wayward meanings are only vaguely apprehended by their victims, and ultimately by the failure of language simply to hold. Justice

31 “Invisible Bullets,” p. 29.
32 Meredith Skura has skillfully analyzed some of these connections in relation to economic and sexual exchange in Measure for Measure. See The Literary Uses of Psychoanalysis (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 243–70.
can find nothing to seize, despite what is known and not known. The comic version of this is most obvious in Elbow’s self-contradictory malapropisms, which recall Dogberry’s and which point to the same slippage of meaning, the same frustration in the transport of messages.\textsuperscript{33} And Pompey’s evasions, his wicked puns and sly re-definitions (“By this hand, sir, his wife is a more respected person than any of us all”) keep the obliquity and perversity of language in the foreground.

The linkage between sex and knowledge, between verbal power, sexual domination, and legal authority, is central to the Angelo-Isabella scenes as well and accounts for the insistent motif of writing, printing, and impressing; Isabella is a marked woman, a fine figure. But it is at the end of the play, when the whole issue is “resolved” by a display of theatrical power, that the dubious validity of such linkages is finally exposed. Sex is brought under legal authority by means of theatrical manipulation and becomes a matter of public knowledge. (The word “know,” with all its accumulated instability, its tendency to undo the certainty it proclaims, ends the play.) It becomes clear that the Duke’s authority and Angelo’s are one and the same not just because Angelo was his deputy, not only because both are deeply associated with the law and its codes, but because both try to write Isabella’s destiny, and both fail. When in 1970 John Barton had Isabella turn away from the Duke’s marriage proposal in confusion,\textsuperscript{34} he underlined an ambiguous silence that, like Lucio’s wayward voice, helps to undo the elaborate structure of verbal and theatrical authority constructed by the Duke and his deputy (and of course by Shakespeare himself as well).

It is on such moments that the whole question of the play’s subversiveness depends. New historicism has taught us to be suspicious of what Jonathan Crewe calls the “sentimental and ultimately sterile mystique of pure subversion.”\textsuperscript{35} Shakespeare, it is argued, gives the Duke full authority, and thus his text is ideologically complicit with Jacobean productions of power. But he also provides material for alternate readings that contest such authority. This does not mean a choice between ideology or no ideology but rather a choice about how ideology is read. If in the rest of this paper I go on to argue for a particular reading of the play’s ideological markings, one that I think the text clearly enables, this does not mean that I want to plead innocent in respect to contemporary debate but only that I want to insist on the possibility of squeezing out from underneath hegemony, or, in Gramscian terms, of establishing a resisting counter-hegemony, seeking other forms of consent. The stance that I see the end of the play taking toward the issues that it raises can thus be seen to be homologous with the stance that I myself seek to take toward the increasingly hegemonic discourse of new historicism.

The structure of the final scene, to return, depends on three successive unveilings, each of which has a pseudo-climactic aspect—first that of the riddling Mariana, then the Duke, then, finally, Claudio.\textsuperscript{36} Closure is invoked and re-

\textsuperscript{33} See Anthony Dawson, “Much Ado About Signifying,” \textit{Studies in English Literature}, 22 (1982) 2, 211–21, for a full discussion of this question in relation to \textit{Much Ado}.


\textsuperscript{35} Crewe, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{36} Stephen Rowan, in an unpublished thesis, “A Dancing of Attitudes: Burke’s Rhetoric on Shakespeare” (Univ. of British Columbia, 1985), analyzes the last scene in terms of this triple unveiling.
invoked. The Duke’s strategy is both to elicit Angelo’s famous comparison between the former’s all-knowing theatricality and the “power divine” that formed the stage-play world,37 and to enact the power of the monarch to fashion that analogy. The form of the ending is stretched to accommodate the politico-
generic strategy; but the foregrounding of the theatrical sleight-of-hand, and the anti-climax of Isabella’s silence, not to mention the unruliness of Lucio and his repression, and the pervasive ambiguity about knowing, all suggest an over-
compensation on the Duke’s part. Theatrical power unsure of itself overdoes it and trips itself up. Who, after all, has the upper hand? The playwright-player, the

king-player, the player-Duke-player? In all cases, it is the theatrical itself that is being called into question; the theatrical as a mode of generic manip-
ulation (i.e., as a way of bringing about closure) and as a mode of political power is deconstructed even as it is used and invoked. We are left with only “ironic reservations,” with little or no reaffirmation at all.

A brilliantly outrageous production that I saw at Stratford, Ontario, in 1985 (directed by Michael Bogdanov) found some new ways to manifest the self-subverting ending of the play. The fact that the production drove many
Shakespeareans to near-apoplexy may have been a sign not of its irresponsibility but of its insight. It featured, among other things, leather-clad transvestites and

whores, a distinctly suspect Duke, and a punk Froth with pink Converse All Stars—but this simply made it vogue. What I found most interesting was the way it linked the vulgar theatricality of its own presentation with the highly theatrical and public imposition of power in the final scene, which was done as if at a fascist rally, the space filled with microphones, loudspeakers, and media lights. The houselights were brought up in an effort to disallow the ordi-
nary, comfortable distance the audience normally enjoys. The effect was dis-
tinctly embarrassing. Theatrical power (the Duke as Mussolini or as King James) and the power of the theatre (the imposition of generic regularity on recal-
citrant material, the audience’s enjoyment of generic convention) were equally discomfitting and questionable.

The treatment of Isabella throughout the production linked the play’s interest

in theatre and power to its interest in male writing and sexual inscription—author-
ity in every sense (think of those massive writing desks, vibrating with power, used by many recent productions for II.ii and II.iv).38 Isabella was a blank sheet, “credulous” to the embrace of every important male character—most tellingly that of the Duke in III.i, immediately before his proposal of the bed-trick to her: “The hand that hath made you fair hath made you good; the goodness that is cheap in beauty makes beauty brief in goodness; but grace, being the soul of your complexion, shall keep the body of it ever fair” (II. 180–84), with an ambiguously knowing tone on this last phrase. At this junc-

37 Angelo’s speech has proved useful not only to idealizing critics like Roy Battenhouse and G. Wilson Knight but to debunking critics like Tennenhousen, who quotes it without blinking, as though it were Shakespeare and not Angelo speaking, and comments that the scene’s return to political authority “obviously aims at inspiring awe” (Power on Display, p. 158, my italics). Goldberg, in James I and the Politics of Literature (p. 232), also quotes this speech but sees it as part of “a scene of representation.” Authority is based in language, but language endlessly reduplicates: “when it is most accurate [language] unseaks itself. . . . By representing representation, Shakespeare [thus] contributes to the discourse of his society and to its most pressing questions about prerogative, power and authority” (pp. 238–39).

38 This feature is emphasized, for example, by director Robin Phillips in connection with his 1975 production. See Ralph Berry, On Directing Shakespeare: Interviews with Contemporary Di-
ture, the action replayed in a softer, more insidious, vein the hard-edged, desperate embrace of Angelo in the previous scene. Again later, at another key moment in the manipulation of the form of the play (the presumed death of Claudio and the “providential” demise of Ragozine), the Duke’s theatrical power was linked to sexual power as his wandering hands emphasized the complex ironies of his lines to Isabella: “Command these fretting waters from your eyes / With a light heart; trust not my holy order / If I pervert your course” (IV.iii.146–50).39 Lucio’s intrusion into this scene, his raised eyebrows and knowing smile (he had seen through the Duke’s disguise all along), plus the Duke’s instinctive recoil registered the irony and suggested very adroitly the undermining of authority that I think the play dramatizes.

It would be naive to conclude that such a production, or indeed, any theatrical performance, is truer to the text than is historicist criticism just because it suggests the possibility of subversion. Nevertheless, an extreme, not necessarily representative, performance such as the one described can still indicate an alternative approach. A theatrical interpretation, like a critical one, seizes on particular features of the text—in the present case the deployment of power in the play and how it gets theatricalized. This production focused especially on sexual politics and on social-political rituals and how the latter are tied up with the rituals of the theatre itself. Such an interpretation makes no claim to historical accuracy or objectivity. Performance rarely does. Almost always it is disdainful of history, concerned mainly with making texts speak directly to contemporary audiences. Nevertheless, this production shows that it is possible for the theatre to generate a perceptive historical analysis by revealing the text’s participation in the complex Elizabethan signifying system from which it originally derived and at the same time making clear its relation to the historical present and, among other things, the conditions of power with which we have to contend.

Historical criticism frequently tries to take a demystifying stance toward the texts it studies, and in so doing empowers itself in relation to those texts by making manifest what they are said to occlude—in particular their investment with power. Theatrical producers would declare that they seek to make the text itself speak. This no doubt is simplistic, but the claim is based on a premise that is worth reviewing in the current climate, where the cult of critical personality and stardom is paradoxically accompanied by a theory that denies subjectivity. The actor’s premise is that character counts, that meaning is embedded in subjectivity,40 whereas, of course, new historicism problematizes subjectivity, regarding “selves” as inscribed by a network of discourses, and reads the concern of the characters for themselves as illusory (and our concern for them in the theatre as naive). Harry Berger has been arguing lately that the theatre’s preoccupation with character and embodiment limits it to a discovery of “surface,” while reading and criticism allow for deeper “excavation.” He goes so

39 Quotations are taken from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
40 This is also the premise of a good deal of performance criticism, making dialogue difficult between itself and historicism or deconstruction. For Philip C. McGuire, who uses the word unproblematically throughout his book (Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare’s Open Silences [Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1985]), “meaning” is generated by directorial and actorly interpretation, e.g., in the way “open silences” such as those of Barnardine and Isabella in the final scene of MM are filled out. For him, different meanings, potential in the playtext, are produced by different performances.
far as to declare that Shakespeare actually provides a critique of performance as a "flight from text," as a repression of the text's "discourse of the Other."41 But when he turns to his own critical-psychoanalytic excavation, his theory loses ground, since what he says about Richard II, for example, and the intricate oedipal ironies surrounding the interplay of Gaunt and his son, turns out to be quite conventional character analysis (though achieved through some ingenious stretching and straining of the lines) and could be readily worked through in rehearsal and "embodied" in performance. His example thus contradicts his general theory. From another point of view also, Berger's point runs into trouble when set against a production like Bogdanov's, since that managed to do what Berger claims only reading can do: expose the ruses of theatricality by de-mystifying its relation to power and repression.

At certain moments, then—and the production under discussion seemed to me one of them—the theatre can contrive both to insist on the inescapability of subjectivity and to suggest its limits, thereby extending an awareness that the subject is not only and always already a text at the same time that it dramatizes subjection to various forms of power. Even in such a production, where "inscription" was very much the name of the game, it was clearly characters who were the victims, and characters who, like Pompey, Barnardine, and Lucio, escaped or subverted the hegemonic power squeeze. In fact, this production reveals that a concern for character and subjectivity can still (though it need not always) lead to a theoretically challenging analysis. Without, I believe, some notion of the limited autonomy of individual subjects (no matter how much the idea may be scoffed at in certain theoretical circles), historicism is bound to remain hobbled by its commitment to notions of containment and monolithic power. I have therefore welcomed those moments in new historicist discourse (some examples of which were mentioned earlier) when "nostalgia" for the subject and his/her freedom, however inconsistently, breaks through. They reveal a hidden desire or lack in the theory itself, one that should, I think, be given some theoretical weight (especially since one way of appealing such desire would be to go to the theatre).

Today's theatre and criticism are inescapably rooted in present-day reality; that could almost go without saying, yet it needs to be said. Both modes of interpretation are to a large extent appropriations of Shakespeare's text for contemporary purposes—both, that is, are implicated in the complex signifying system of late twentieth-century capitalism and its conditions of power. But at the same time, both have something to say about that "other" time. That the one (the theatrical) allows for the possibility of actual subversion while the

41 Harry Berger, Jr., "Psychoanalyzing the Shakespeare text: the first three scenes of the Henriad" in Shakespeare and the Question of Theory, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 210–29, esp. p. 228. See also his "Text Against Performance in Shakespeare: The Example of Macbeth" in The Power of Forms, pp. 49–79, which makes a similar argument; there he talks about what he sees as a "new consensus": that the "primary object of interpretation" is the "community of the play," the image of which is "inscribed only in the text," and is "blurred by the conditions of performance" (p. 59). Berger seems to assume that performance is single and unchanging, incapable of irony, its meanings univocal. McGuire (see note 40 above) assumes the precise opposite: that those who treat Shakespeare's plays as "texts" tend to see them as stable and fixed, while those who attend to performance are aware of ever-changing meanings being generated at different times. That both critics seek to privilege the multivocal is itself a sign of the times, a way of inserting themselves into the dominant critical paradigm. And it is no surprise that each would see his opponents as hung up on uniformity and univocality. But neither, I think, is precisely right in his assumptions.
other either explicitly or implicitly precludes it, leads me, in my grumpy, all-too-Canadian skepticism about authority (even when the authority in question is that of a discourse that takes a skeptical attitude toward authority), to favor the theatrical. For ultimately I do think, to return to the particular case at hand, that the elaborate restitution at the end of Measure for Measure is more hoax than reaffirmation. A critical theory insufficiently alert to the ideological role of its own practice may obscure that hoaxy ending, but I find it reassuring that a subversive theatrical practice can discover it.