



## SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRE

### WORKSHEET 3: APPROACHING SHAKESPEARE NOW

**Task 1: Please read Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's foreword to *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1994) and then answer the following questions:**

1. What is cultural materialism?
2. How does cultural materialism read literature in general and Shakespeare's plays in particular, and in what ways do you think it differs from liberal humanist or traditional literary criticism?
3. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of each method?

**Task 2: Please read the following statements about different ways of reading Shakespeare's works. Can you identify their respective authors – Harold Bloom, A.C. Bradley, Jonathan Dollimore – all of them from the course reading list? Write from two to three keywords that you think best summarise the main characteristics of each view; then write a few lines depicting their different visions of Shakespeare's texts.**

- a) "Personality, in our sense, is a Shakespearean invention, and is not only Shakespeare's greatest originality but also the authentic cause of his perpetual pervasiveness. [...] Our ideas as to what makes the self authentically human owe more to Shakespeare than ought to be possible, but then he has become a Scripture. [...] He extensively informs the language we speak, his principal characters have become our mythology, and he, rather than his involuntary follower Freud, is our psychologist".

"Why do his personages seem so real to us, and how could he contrive that illusion so persuasively? Historical (and historicised) considerations have not aided us much in the answering of such questions [...] We cannot extract, from Shakespeare's era or from our own, social information that will explain his ability to create 'forms more real than living men,' as Shelley phrased it. Shakespeare's rival playwrights were subject to the same disjunctions between ideas of love, order, and the Eternal as he was, but they gave us eloquent caricatures, at best, rather than men and women. [...] If, for you, literature is primarily language, then the primacy of Shakespeare is only a cultural phenomenon, produced by sociopolitical urgencies. In this view, Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare – his plays were written by the social, political, and economic energies of his age".

- b) "I first read Jacobean drama while studying English at university. [...] This drama seemed to cross conventional boundaries, or require that I did so in reading it. For example, the individual versus society dichotomy had to go; everything about the Jacobean hero/ine or malcontent was already social, and in an obviously political way".

"Shakespeare is inseparable from what others have already made Shakespeare mean; the rewriting is as much a critique of existing interpretations as it is a production of new ones. [...] Jacobean theatre interrogated structures of belief which legitimated prevailing power relations, and [...] it often did this by seizing upon, intensifying and exposing those contradictions in the prevailing social order which it is one of the effects of ideology to efface. [...] Tragedy contributed, more radically than any other cultural phenomenon of the same period, to discrediting the values of absolute monarchy, thereby paving the way, with wholly destructive means, for the English Revolution. [...] Tragedy, in this period, was an unrivalled instrument of criticism and dissent".

- c) "Tragedy with Shakespeare is concerned always with persons of 'high degree'. [...] In almost all we observe a marked one-sidedness, a predisposition in some particular direction; a total incapacity, in certain circumstances, of resisting the force which draws in this direction; a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion, or habit of mind. This, it would seem, is, for Shakespeare, the fundamental tragic trait. [...] This at least may be said of the principal persons, and among them, of the hero, who always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes. [...] [I]n his error and his fall we may be vividly conscious of the possibilities of human nature. Hence, in the first place, a Shakespearean tragedy is never, like some miscalled tragedies, depressing".

"Let us attempt then to re-state the idea that the ultimate power in the tragic world is a moral order. [...] It is an example of justice. [...] The rigour of its justice is terrible, no doubt, for a tragedy is a terrible story: but, in spite of fear and pity, we acquiesce, because our sense of justice is satisfied".

**Task 3: Here are some well-known statements about Shakespeare's plays broadly belonging to either the liberal humanist or the cultural materialist approach. Can you identify which approach each quote exemplifies?**

- a) "From the early 1590s, [...] Shakespeare grappled again and again with a deeply unsettling question: how is it possible for a whole country to fall into the hands of a tyrant? [...] The playwright was not accusing England's current ruler, Elizabeth I, of being a tyrant".
- b) "[I]ssues of class, sexuality, imperialist and colonial exploitation have everything to do with Jacobean drama".

- c) "In the very excess of his suffering lies man's claim to dignity. Powerless and broken [...] he assumes a new grandeur".
- d) "Shakespeare is not only in himself the Western canon; he has become the universal canon".
- e) "Shakespeare's body of work in the genre [comedy] is unequalled in lyricism, in enjoyment of the spirit of laughter, in warmth of humour as well as sharpness of wit, in clear-sighted perception, understanding and, ultimately, forgiveness of the waywardness of human behaviour. Throughout his career, but especially in his later comedies, he explores moral issues in relation to friendship and to love. These plays represent a continuing struggle to comprehend the limits of human folly and, above all, the importance of what Keats was to call 'the holiness of the heart's affections'".
- f) "In the present-day world, alienated in poverty and affluence, dehumanized by state bureaucracies and military machines, the most urgent study of mankind would seem to be not the eternal human condition, but the prospect of survival in the face of impersonal power drives".
- g) "The representation of human character and personality remains always the supreme literary value, whether in drama, lyric, or narrative".
- h) "[I]t is necessary that [the tragic hero] should have so much greatness that in his error and fall we may be vividly conscious of the possibilities of human nature".
- i) "The witches are the heroines of the piece [...] they [...] by releasing ambitious thoughts in Macbeth, expose [the] hierarchical social order for what it is [...] the pious self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare. [...] Their riddling, ambiguous speech [...] promises to subvert this structure".
- j) "Shakespeare [...] justly imitates essential human nature, which is a universal and not a social phenomenon".
- k) "[*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*] reflect the cultural anxiety pervading early modern England, when notions of romantic love were beginning to challenge the norms of patriarchal authority in the matter of marriage".
- l) "Later modern human beings are still being shaped by Shakespeare, not as Englishmen, or as American women, but in modes increasingly post-national and postgender. He has become the first universal author, replacing the Bible in the secularized consciousness".
- m) "Studies of the reproduction of 'Shakespeare' have shown him/it to be a powerful cultural institution. More is at stake in the cultural struggle over what he represents and embodies than for any other figure in literature and maybe within the humanities more generally".

- n) “What remains powerfully active in the literature and culture of early modern England – a description of the period with less assumptions than ‘Renaissance’ – is the sense of identity as *constituted*, as an effect of what pre-exists it”.
- o) “The conventions of comedy, like those of all literary modes, are consistent with the customs of the society in which a comedy is produced; the society of early modern England was patriarchal and authoritarian, inhospitable to disruption or disorder. Shakespeare’s comedies, then, can be seen as instruments of social stability in their representation of the unshakable power of husbands, aristocrats, and other dominant cultural voices”.

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