Beyond Historicism: Presentism, Subjectivity, Politics
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Abstract
The article spells out the theory and practice of presentism, a ‘new kid on the theoretical block,’ and examines its implications for Shakespeare studies. It theorizes the critic as temporal mediator who owns up to constructing meaning. It investigates the politics of the vexed relationships among historicism, materialism, feminism, queer theory, and postcolonialism, exploring presentism as a way out of the theoretical thickets of recent years. The article theorizes the radical potentiality of adopting a presentist lens to analyze gender and queer issues in Shakespeare’s texts; in addition, it briefly explores the implications of presentism for postcolonial studies of Shakespeare. In opposition to historicist studies that theorize the subject as straitjacketed by manifestations of political, social, and economic power, presentism theorizes subjectivity as resistance. In opposition to ‘new materialist,’ or antiquarian, studies that drain politics out of Shakespeare’s texts, presentism (re)politicizes Shakespeare. The article offers several examples of presentism as an intervention on 400 years of theoretical and critical tradition.

We encounter each other in words, words spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed, words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark the will of some one and then others, who said I need to see what’s on the other side.

I know there’s something better down the road. We need to find a place where we are safe.
We walk into that which we cannot yet see. (Alexander, 16–24)

‘We walk into that which we cannot yet see.’ If that line sounds familiar, it is because it is from Elizabeth Alexander’s down-to-earth, elegant, gritty poem, ‘Praise Song for the Day,’ delivered upon the occasion of the Inauguration of President Barack Obama. ‘We walk into that which we cannot yet see’ – the words bring to mind the Andean tribe that speaks an Indian dialect called ‘Aymara,’ of which Linda Charnes writes in her article, ‘Reading for the Wormholes: Micro-periods from the Future.’ According to the temporal/spatial paradigm of Aymara speakers, the past is envisioned as in front of them, while, conversely, the future is envisioned as behind them. The reason this paradigm is the reverse of the one with which North Americans and Europeans are familiar has to do with cognition. Aymara speakers regard what they know as ‘what you see in front of you, with your own eyes. The past is known, so it lies ahead of you.’ Accordingly, they regard what they do not know as what they cannot see: ‘The future is unknown, so it lies behind you, where you can’t see it’ (Gorman D3; qtd. in Charnes, ‘Wormholes’ par. 3).1 This temporal/spatial paradigm from Aymara-speaking culture reminds us that historical time as we know it is not ‘reality’ or a ‘given,’ as Charnes points out. Instead, it is a function of a particular disposition toward knowledge and the language we use – ‘a

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function of how, and where, we look’ (‘Wormholes’ par. 4). Perhaps it is useful to draw a distinction between time and temporality here. Time, to the extent that it does not concern itself with humans, does not have a politics; it is indifferent to human existence, akin to the impersonal ‘Time Passes’ sections in Virginia Woolf’s modernist novel, To the Lighthouse. Temporality, on the other hand, to the extent that it involves how humans use time, has a politics, akin to the narrative about Mrs. Ramsey and her family that structures the bulk of Woolf’s novel. In other words, as Charnes contends, the process of historicizing adds a political dimension to a natural process that is in and of itself ideologically neutral (‘Wormholes’ par. 3).

‘The fierce urgency of now’ is a phrase that Presidential candidate Barack Obama used repeatedly during his campaign to convey the crisis that the United States was experiencing at the time. The line originates, though, in a speech that the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered in 1967 at Riverside Church in New York City: ‘We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now,’ as King put it on the subject of ending the Vietnam War. Likewise, for many of us, more than a generation later, ‘the fierce urgency of now’ is what we experienced opposing the Iraq War. Suddenly, there we were, suspended in the starkness of mid-January, reminded of Rev. King’s opposition to one war on one day and Presidential candidate Obama’s opposition to another war on the very next. For me, these two lines – ‘We walk into that which we cannot yet see’ and ‘We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now’ – will always intersect with each other, saturated with the symbolic richness of that moment when, within the space of twenty-four hours, the birthday of Reverend King converged with the inauguration of President Obama.

What, you may ask, do the Inauguration of President Obama and the pacifist ideals of the Reverend King have to do with Shakespeare and early modern England? Nothing, it would seem. Or everything. In recent years, presentism has developed as a theoretical and critical strategy of interpreting Shakespeare’s texts in relation to contemporary political, social, and economic ideologies, discourses, and events. In so doing, presentism has consequently challenged the dominant theoretical and critical practice of reading Shakespeare historically. Presentism departs from attempts on the part of historicism to restore Shakespeare’s texts to the conditions of their original production, or ‘to the earliest conditions of [their] realization,’ as David Scott Kastan puts it (17). Viewing such a scholarly venture to be a fantasy, presentism focuses instead on the various temporal and geographical conditions in which consumption of Shakespeare’s texts occurs. A variety of nuanced meanings in Shakespeare’s texts is constructed at different moments in the four centuries that separate Shakespeare and us, on the one hand, and different cultures around the globe, on the other. And focusing on meanings that are irreversibly shifting in this way, as Ewan Fernie points out, is to undertake an understanding of the genuine historicity of texts (‘Last Act,’ 186).

1. The Anecdote

In October 2009, the student newspaper on the campus of a large state university in the United States ran a full-page advertisement for a local burger joint on its last page. It featured a color photograph of a hamburger in a bun with the works (lettuce, tomato, onion) in the middle of the page. The words, ‘After a hard day,’ are printed above it and the words, ‘unwind with something tender,’ are printed below it (italics in the original). But that is not all. Directly under the words, ‘something tender,’ is a cartoon figure of a naked woman in a kneeling position. Her posterior is toward the viewer; her face is also turned toward the viewer. She has long, black hair. She is smiling. And, in a parody of
those charts of cow carcasses that used to adorn butchers’ shops in a bygone era, her body is divided into parts. Each of her bodily parts is labeled, as follows – ‘rump,’ ‘round,’ ‘soup bone,’ ‘loin,’ ‘rib,’ ‘chuck,’ ‘breast,’ and ‘shoulder.’ It turns out that the woman has a name, ‘Juicy Lucy.’ She is the restaurant’s logo, or mascot. A large picture of her adorns an interior wall of the burger joint, and, until recently, was prominently displayed on its website. A large inflatable of her floats adjacent to the restaurant.

In its next issue, the student newspaper published an op-ed piece written by a male PhD student in the Department of English who was outraged by the advertisement and the logo, and who pointed out that its ‘demeaning, degrading and disgusting’ representation of human beings had no place in a university community publication. His op-ed set off a firestorm of controversy about the ‘Juicy Lucy’ logo. (It is worth noting that it was the op-ed, and not the advertisement itself, that sparked the controversy.) Critics (who included men, as well as women) pointed out that the advertisement and the logo, not only objectified women, but also promoted dehumanization and cannibalism. Defenders (who included women, as well as men) argued that freedom of speech trumped any and all criticism of the advertisement and the logo. On the same day, a female PhD student in the Department of English set up a Facebook page urging members to boycott the burger joint. The next morning, the leading progressive blog in the city led with the story. The following morning, the story went national in Salon.com. That same day, the student newspaper responded to the controversy in an editorial, pointing out that the 109 blog entries weighing in on the Juicy Lucy logo within the space of seventy-two hours constituted a number greater than any single article on the website in the history of the newspaper. Furthermore, the newspaper had been overwhelmed by the number of email messages on the subject. In its next issue, a law professor wrote an op-ed piece advocating responsible freedom of speech and self-censorship on the part of the editors of the paper. On the same day, the Assistant Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, with the intent of creating education about and awareness of the issue, sponsored a meeting among the different parties to discuss how the campus community might move forward. At the moment of the writing of this article, the university administration and the student government have agreed to fund an eight-page special feature of an upcoming issue of the student newspaper devoted to the expression of various perspectives on the issue.

The firestorm of controversy that swept the campus over a period of several weeks prompted me to reflect with some degree of irony, of course, on the pronouncements on the part of those who have proclaimed, for years now, that we have entered into a ‘post-feminist’ era. As I read entry after entry on the newspaper’s blog, I was struck by not only the misogyny inherent in the carving up of a female body for, presumably, male consumption but also the misogyny expressed by the defenders of the logo. They attacked critics of the logo as ‘femi-nazis’; women and men alike who needed to ‘grow a pair’; who lacked a sense of humor; who were spoiled girls throwing a tantrum because they could not have their way; and so on. Critics of the logo, on the other hand, repeatedly pointed out the logical fallacies in the defenders’ arguments (e.g., ad hominem attacks, two wrongs make a right, straw man, red herring, and so on) and persistently requested that defenders respond to the substance of critics’ arguments.

Somewhere in the midst of this controversy, I was struck by a moment 600 years ago in Western literary history. It occurred to me that the current attacks on women smacked of those which Christine de Pisan may have had to endure in France in 1405, when, in Le Livre de la Cite des Dames, she courageously spoke out against the misogynistic discourses in the Roman de la Rose, specifically, and medieval texts, generally. Her ‘city,’ of course, had its allegorical dimension – it was, in fact, her 271-page defense of women.
against male-authored attacks. In articulating her objections to the status quo, Christine initiated the *querelle des femmes*, or the controversy about the nature of ‘woman.’ It was a debate that would eventually cross the English Channel, structuring decades of pamphlet controversy throughout the 15th and early 16th centuries about the nature of ‘woman’ in England – a controversy that would also be characterized by attacks and defenses. Was ‘woman’ inherently evil, the metaphorical descendent of Eve, responsible for the downfall of all mankind? Was she instead inherently good, the descendent of the Virgin Mary, responsible for giving birth to Christ? Both? Neither? Before Christine, it is important to note, denigrating constructions of woman were simply ‘the way things were’ in a profoundly patriarchal culture that valorized masculinity, particularly celibate masculinity, and constructed femininity in vicious terms. After Christine, there was a debate and those discourses thereby achieved a name – *misogyny*, or woman-hating. Further analogies occurred to me. The burger joint’s management and the logo’s defenders resembled the late medieval and early modern attackers of women in the rhetorical controversy about the nature of woman. The ‘Juicy Lucy’ logo itself resembled misogynist stereotypes about women as merely sexual creatures that the attackers deployed in the controversy. The logo’s critics resembled the defenses of women in the pamphlet controversy that Christine initiated.

Another issue that struck me about the ‘Juicy Lucy’ controversy is that of intended audience. While reading the blog entries that castigated critics of the logo for their lack of a sense of humor, a question occurred to me: Precisely, who is intended to laugh at the depiction of a woman (albeit a cartoon woman) as a piece of meat carved up for male consumption? In other words, who is in on the joke? Perhaps, because I had recently taught Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* just weeks beforehand, I was reminded of a similar question that Shakespeare scholar Shirley Nelson Garner raises about audience response to that dramatic text: Who is laughing at the (mis)treatment of Katherine, the so-called *shrew*, by Petruchio, Baptista, and the other male characters? Who’s in on the joke? Whether you see the play as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ she argues, depends on where you see yourself in terms of the central joke. If you are able to insert yourself as ‘in’ on it, the play will undoubtedly seem more pleasurable than if you are not:

The central joke in *The Taming of the Shrew* is directed against a woman. The play seems written to please a misogynist audience, especially men who are gratified by sexually sadistic pleasures. Since I am outside the community for whom the joke is made and do not share its implicit values, I do not participate in its humor. Because the play does not have for me what I assume to be its intended effect, that is, I do not find it funny, I do not find it as good as Shakespeare’s other comedies.3 (106)

Garner’s apparently simple question draws attention to differential audience response, providing a rupture, moreover, in traditional liberal humanist readings of the dramatic text. For even as traditional criticism universalizes a specifically male response to the (mis)treatment of Katherine, so too are the defenders of the ‘Juicy Lucy’ logo universalizing a specifically male response to the objectification of women in the present moment. Despite the fact that the advertisement was purchased with the student activity fees of the entire student body through the student government that funds the campus newspaper, the logo’s humor was aimed at only a portion of the campus audience who were deemed to be ‘in on the joke.’

In writing about *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*, Kathleen McLuskie points out, rather pessimistically, that feminist criticism is ‘restricted to exposing its own exclusion from the text. It has no point of entry into it, for the dilemmas of the narrative and the
sexuality under discussion are constructed in completely male terms’ (97). A quarter century later, we might make similar observations about popular culture, as of Shakespeare studies. The conceptual categories that influence contemporary advertising, much like those influencing contemporary scholarly discourse, are often man made, influenced by male anxieties, desires, and interests. As such, to paraphrase Phyllis Rackin, they constitute tools of women’s exclusion and often of women’s oppression. Even the best feminist scholarship feels the need to situate itself within a patriarchal master narrative (Women 16, 10).

2. *Always Anachronize*

‘How can we ignore the torture of prisoners?’ I remarked to Michael Neill in a hotel bar in New Orleans just before an evening stroll down Bourbon Street in 2004. I was struck by the incongruity between an annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, for which we were gathering, on the one hand, and the phenomenon of Abu Ghraib, the news of which had just broken and was dominating the headlines, on the other. My sense of frustration with the separation of politics and literature was palpable, and eventually manifested itself in an essay, ‘‘Mirror[s] of all Christian kings’’: Hank Cinq and George Deux,’ that analyzes the parallels between Henry 5’s invasion of France and George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq. The parallels offer an endlessly fruitful subject for exploration and analysis. Reformed prodigal sons of national political leaders, both Hank and George inherit the mantles of their fathers. Recruiting soldiers from the working classes, both political leaders conduct imperialistic invasions of foreign countries. The charge, ‘war criminal,’ comes to be lodged against both Hank and George for their violation of war etiquette and international agreements regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. And both political leaders believe in the absolute power of their respective offices – power that is, moreover, divinely inspired. I interrogate the implications of this construction of meaning for the political climate in which United States citizens found themselves enmeshed under the Bush regime – as for Shakespeare’s dramatic text (63–87).

For Terence Hawkes, on the other hand, the recent ‘devolution’ in British politics is a development for which presentism is particularly suited to make a significant contribution to Shakespeare studies. A concept of ‘what being English meant’ had evolved out of the dominance of Britain by England over the centuries. Although informed by the expansion of the British empire, this idea of Englishness was not so much a nation or a way of life, Hawkes points out, as a ‘vaguely conceived, transcendent and timeless notion of “humanity”’ (142). In the primary constitutional change in the United Kingdom at the outset of the twenty-first century, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland committed to parliaments and assemblies in 1997 that became realized in 1999. The ‘Great Britain’ project that Shakespeare’s texts repeatedly dramatize must in the future be regarded not just as the opening of a new, permanent world order, Hawkes argues, but as the beginning of an enterprise that, after four centuries, has now come to an end. To the extent that Shakespeare’s dramatic texts can never be read after 1999 in quite the same way that they could be read before that year, devolution cannot help but alter of our responses to them (4). The dramatic texts’ meanings change kaleidoscopically before our eyes – exemplifying how the present shapes the past. Hawkes concludes with the following question:

Could it possibly be that the Scots, the Welsh, the Irish might at a certain point in the future come to regard an involvement with Shakespeare as somehow condoning or even embodying the ‘Englishing’ by which, in some eyes, they were for too long moulded? (143)
The extent to which the broader cultural conflict characterized by the disintegration of the United Kingdom or an English-speaking world hegemony has become overt is open to question. Hawkes’s most recent monograph, *Shakespeare in the Present*, particularly ‘Bryn Glas,’ on *1 Henry 4* (chapter three), and ‘Aberdaugleddyf,’ on *Cymbeline* (chapter four), exemplifies this vein of presentist thought.

‘Hillary Clinton Rejects Lady Macbeth Image,’ reads the headline for Martin Fletcher’s column in the *London Times* in 1993. The former United States First Lady’s early attempts to direct part of her husband’s domestic agenda, health care reform, were met with vehement opposition, as Georgianna Ziegler points out. When asked why Clinton thought her active involvement in her husband’s administration provoked so much controversy, she responded that it was a reflection of the national debate over the role of contemporary women: ‘People are struggling to define what it means to be a woman, a mother, a wife’ (qtd. in Ziegler 120). Contemporary feminist thought has taught us that notions of gender are culturally constructed and has invited us to destabilize the status quo. Challenging received definitions of gender, however, continues to make many of us uncomfortable, as Ziegler notes (119–20). Because of Lady Macbeth’s perceived ability to empower the feminine while disempowering the masculine, she frightens some of us, as she frightened some of our ancestors. Analyzing changing cultural interpretations of her character helps us to tease out ideologies of gender that have constructed us – as much as we have constructed them. Lady Macbeth and Hillary Clinton – and particularly Presidential candidate Clinton – have both continued to figure in a conflicted admiration for and fear of women’s rights, power, and professional success in United States society (138). One wonders what Martin Fletcher would have to say about current United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in the Obama administration.

I recall that moment when Kathleen Conlin’s production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Utah Shakespearean Festival in the late 1990s evoked contemporary events that came flooding in, unbidden, upon my experience of the performance as an audience member. Capulet hovered in a threatening manner over Juliet in Act 3, scene 5, as she cowered alone with her back to the audience on her wedding bed, downstage center, after Romeo’s departure and Lady Capulet’s abandonment of her. No physical violence was enacted, as it is in Franco Zeffirelli’s cinematic text, in which Paul Hardwick’s Capulet flings Olivia Hussey’s Juliet against the wall and she slides down it like a wet dishrag. What made patriarchal violence palpable at this particular moment in this particular dramatic text, despite its invisibility on stage, was its contemporary social context. Conlin’s directorial decision regarding blocking in this scene resonated with events in the national news in the United States and emphasized the fact that not only enforced marriage but also polygamy and incest are still practiced by the FLDS, or Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints, within and in the immediate environs of the state of Utah. Mel Parkinson’s article, ‘The Ties That Blind,’ among many others, publicized a polygamist incest case in Utah that renewed national debate over the ethical implications of the patriarchal practices of enforced marriage, polygamy, and incest at the very point in time and in the very environs of the *Romeo and Juliet* production in question. Enforced marriage as a social practice in contemporary United States society thus animated the dramatic device of enforced marriage within the world of Shakespeare’s tragedy, as well as the remote social practice characteristic of early modern English society. I suspect I am not the only Shakespearean (or audience member, for that matter) to experience the onrush of contemporary events upon a Shakespearean production in this way – in what Hawkes refers to as an ‘eruption’ (22) and Charnes refers to as a ‘wormhole.’ The question is – what
do we do with that moment of recognition of the utter contemporaneity of Shakespeare? Do we let it flit away back into the obscurity of unconsciousness? Or do we analyze it, intervening into past meanings that have been constructed over decades and centuries? From a presentist’s point of view, the answer is obvious.

The inculcation to ‘always historicize’ is tinged with nostalgia, Charnes points out – an urge to abandon the present to satisfy yearnings that may not have much to do with a positivist idea of how the past ‘really was’ (‘Wormholes’ par. 17). This is not to propose that we discontinue our efforts to understand how Shakespeare’s contemporaries lived and what they experienced. History, we can all agree, matters, as Charnes succinctly puts it (‘Wormholes,’ par. 17). When a desire to understand the past evolves, however, into a mandate to ‘always historicize,’ one end of the temporal spectrum is being privileged at the expense of the other end, and all points in between. For to only historicize is to insist on looking backward rather than looking forward, or looking around us – actively engaging in the present moment in which we are situated. Hugh Grady remarks on how historicism, as the dominant theoretical and critical paradigm in Shakespeare studies in recent decades, has privileged the past at the expense of the present to the extent of obliterating the present (‘Overview’ 112). Similarly, Ewan Fernie points out that the emphasis on historicist critical practices has repressed the present: ‘As what must be excluded from critical awareness to sustain historical contact,’ he notes, ‘the present may be considered the unconscious of new historicism.’ So desperately has historicism repressed the present in recent years, in fact, it suggests an imminent theoretical crisis (‘Prospect’ 8). The end result of decades of historicism is that the present has gone undertheorized, even untheorized.

3. Speaking with the Living

A heightened degree of critical awareness of ourselves, situated in the 21st century, defines us as readers and interpreters of texts, as Terence Hawkes points out. Owning up to our critical self-awareness in this way, he intimates, constitutes a theoretical stance – one that involves ‘the fundamentally radical act of putting one’s cards on the table’ (22). It thereby requires that doing what we do – our critical practices – are overt acts of shouldering responsibility for constructing meanings in Shakespeare’s texts. This theoretical stance enables us to put theory into practice by using that awareness to perform interventions in early modern texts and culture. In the 1980s, Jonathan Dollimore commented on and appreciated the determined and democratic questioning of conservative constructions, not just of literature and sexuality, but of the political and social realities of which they are inextricably a part. The tradition of all the dead generations still weighs upon the living, he notes, but it does so less heavily because of such questioning (‘Challenge,’ 82). More recently, presentists have argued for the necessity of a ‘principled and self-inventing betrayal’ (Hawkes 20) of an oppressive scholarly tradition – one that has historically omitted, denigrated, or relegated to the margins women, queers, people of color, the working classes, non-Christians, and so on.

Feminist and queer critical practices are inextricably rooted in the political, economic, and social developments of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries – feminist practices, in the Western women’s liberation movement; queer practices, in Stonewall. This rootedness, or situatedness, in the present moment obliges them to acknowledge that fact. Phyllis Rackin is one prominent Shakespeare scholar who understands and appreciates the inherently presentist nature of the feminist project.
Our own experience of Shakespeare’s women is conditioned not only by the accumulated tradition of Shakespeare scholarship and reception but also by the present history of the world in which we live: both of these histories help to shape our experience of the plays, whether we study them in an academic setting, see them on stage or screen, or read them in the privacy of our own studies. (Women, 5–6)

Both of these histories, she goes on to point out – four centuries of scholarship and reception, on the one hand, and the world in which we live, on the other – are in need of feminist intervention in the twenty-first century (6).

The relationship between texts and contexts, literature and society, as inevitably overlapping, interpenetrating entities is elegantly articulated by Edward Said:

Texts are worldly, to some extent they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted. (World, 4)

It is important to note that he emphasizes the historical moment in which a text is consumed, or interpreted, as well as that in which it is produced, or located. Despite Said’s emphasis on the interpenetrating relationship between the text and the world, however, Shakespeare scholar David Scott Kastan uses this quotation to justify ushering in the study of material objects in a scholarly movement that would come to be known as ‘the new materialism.’ Only by turning to history and away from theory, Kastan asserts, can the ‘worldliness’ of a text be discovered and demonstrated:

A recognition of the historicity of the play – as book and as performance – a focus on the specific conditions of its production and reception, returns it to the world in which and to which it is alive; increasingly, what literary criticism is learning is that what it attends to are the marks of this worldliness. Reading those marks, recognizing that a play’s materializations, in the printing house and in the playhouse, are the play’s meanings rather than merely passive and sometimes embarrassing conveyors of them, is what I take to be the almost inevitable practice of Shakespeare studies after theory... (42)

A focus on material objects, however, to the extent that it unmoors them from political, social, and economic contexts – whether Shakespeare’s, or our own – amounts to fetishizing them, or draining them of their political meanings. That is why Hugh Grady deploys the term antiquarianism to criticize an exclusive focus on material objects (Wolf 24; ‘Overview’ 112).

Presentism should be wary of reconstructing a binary opposition between past and present that reproduces the linear paradigm of historicism. Michel Serres, a philosopher and a historian of science, rejects the linear paradigm, instead theorizing time as ‘crumpled,’ like a handkerchief, a metaphor he uses to convey nonlinear relationships between past and present:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant....As we experience time – as much in our inner sense as externally in nature, as much as le temps of history as le temps of weather – it resembles this crumpled version much more than the flat, overly simplified one. (60, qtd. in Harris par. 22)

Serres’s theory of temporality allows for proximity and affinity, as Jonathan Gil Harris points out, as well as distance and difference (par. 22). In addition to a theory of
temporality, moreover, the metaphor of the crumpled handkerchief also allows for a theory of mediation. But the mediator, according to Bruno Latour, does not mediate between two fixed entities. Instead, she ‘materializes a network of multiple agents’ that collectively create something different from that which any one of them is able to create on its own (78–82, qtd. in Harris par. 22). The crumpling of the past and future into the folds of the present depends upon ‘the artful labor of the critic,’ as Harris puts it (par. 23), that transcends empirical descriptions of objects as they ‘really are.’ or ‘really were.’ Serres and Latour enable us as critics to understand how our mediations create the past and the present. Unlike Stephen Greenblatt, we have never been speaking with the dead. Instead, Harris notes, we speak in networks within which the past is alive and speaks with and through us in the accents of the present.

‘Why has historicism constructed the early modern period and homosexuality alike as alterity?’ is a question posed by Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon from a queer theoretical standpoint. In calling the entire historicist project into question, they object to its mapping of sexual difference onto chronological difference – when, as they put it, ‘the difference between past and present becomes also the difference between sexual regimes’ (1609). In addition to the collapsing of sexual difference and chronological difference into each other, they, too, resist a linear notion of time. Instead of historicism’s construction of a relationship between past and present that is fixed, knowable, and different, they, in a gesture they call unhistoricism, theorize that history is insufficient to house the queer project. And Menon, it should be noted, has gone on to interrogate these issues more fully in her recent book, Unhistorical Shakespeare. Instead of historicism’s construction of linear history based on heterosexual difference, Goldberg and Menon theorize expanding nonheterosexual possibilities in a move they call homohistory (1609).

Parallel developments are evident in postcolonial studies. The foundational theoretical and critical text is, of course, Edward Said’s Orientalism, including its central binary opposition of Occident and Orient, the former characterized as simultaneously fascinated with and threatened by the exoticism and the eroticism of the cultural, racial Otherness of the latter. The implications of Said’s work have been explored and critiqued by postcolonial Shakespeareans, Ania Loomba preeminent among them (43–51). It is non-Shakespearean postcolonial theorists, though, who have coded Said’s work in terms of temporality – the Occident configured as the present; the Orient, as the past – and, in turn, critiqued historicism. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, points out that the problem with historicism is its alignment with the Occident, placing the Orient in a precarious time and space, what he calls ‘an imaginary waiting-room of history.’ He criticizes John Stuart Mill’s historicist construction of colonized cultures as never quite civilized enough to be considered capable of independent self-rule:

According to Mill, Indians or Africans were not yet civilised enough to rule themselves. Some historical time of development and civilisation (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered prepared for such a task. Mill’s historicist argument thus consigned Indians, Africans and other ‘rude’ nations to an imaginary waiting-room of history. (8, his emphasis)

Postcolonial theorists and critics might, a la Goldberg and Menon, pose the question: ‘Why has historicism constructed the early modern period and colonized cultures alike as alterity?’ In also calling the entire historicist project into question, postcolonialists might object to its mapping of geographical difference onto chronological difference – when the distinction between past and present, early modern and modern, comes to signify the distinction between national, cultural, and ethnic regimes.
4. **There is Subversion, No End of Subversion, Especially for Us**

Two decades ago, Shakespeareans such as Carol Thomas Neely, Lynda Booth, Marguerite Waller, and Peter Erickson simultaneously made an argument for the inherently presentist nature of feminism. At a moment when scholars were viewing historicism as synonymous with a ‘new politics,’ he instead characterized it as apolitical. Historicism’s attention to the politics of the early modern period was ironically accompanied by a neglect of politics in the late 20th century. On the other hand, the strengths of feminist criticism, he noted, were twofold – its belief that the present has a valid, positive role in Shakespeare studies and its commitment to cultural and social change (336).

The issues of subjectivity and autonomous agency are inseparable from that of politics, as Jonathan Dollimore realized in his introductory chapter of *Political Shakespeare*. In the consolidation/subversion containment debate that characterized the conflict between historicists, cultural materialists, and feminists in the 1980s, Dollimore disagreed with Stephen Greenblatt about the degree of autonomous agency that is possible for the individual. Different theories about the kinds of work that social structures do underlie this disagreement. Materialists such as Dollimore and Alan Sinfield drew primarily upon the work of Raymond Williams for their cultural paradigm, according to which the interplay among multiple discourses – residual (or dying), dominant, emergent (or new) – fluctuates in any given society at any given moment (6). Historicists such as Greenblatt, on the other hand, drew primarily upon the work of Foucault and Althusser for their cultural paradigm, the latter of whom was concerned with dominant discourses rather than residual or emergent discourses or the interplay among all three. Because for Althusser the domain of ideology was exclusively the domain of *dominant* ideology, he therefore deemphasized the potential for cultural conflict. And when all ideology collapses into dominant ideology, oppositional ideologies cannot be theorized. Eventually, historicists came to represent as subversive in early modern England that which was simultaneously drained of any subversive power in the present. Their work thereby came to embody the ideology that, as Greenblatt put it, ‘there is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us’ (‘Bullets,’ 29, 45).

From a feminist perspective, Lynda Booth and Carol Thomas Neely took issue with historicism’s remarginalization of gender issues, denial of subjectivity, and emphasis on containment rather than subversion in the consolidation/subversion containment debate. Booth criticized a shared indifference to gender issues that characterized both historicism and materialism:

> When gender is not being simply ignored in the materialist critiques, it repeatedly ends up getting displaced into some other issue – usually race or class – and women are silently eradicated from the text, leaving only one gender for consideration. This kind of displacement and erasure...is, in effect, a modern day re-silencing taking place even as Renaissance strategies of silencing are being discussed... . (728–79)

She castigated Greenblatt for his statement that erased women from the worlds of Shakespeare’s dramatic texts, as from his stage and his culture: ‘The open secret of identity – that within differentiated individuals is a single structure, identifiably male – is presented literally in the all-male cast’ (*Negotiations* 93). ‘Suddenly,’ Booth responded, ‘there is one gender and there are no more women in Shakespeare’s plays’ (730). Likewise, Neely took both historicists and materialists to task for remarginalizing if not completely erasing the female subject that feminist scholars had long been laboring to bring to life.
The denial of subjectivity and identity is pleasurable...especially to those who have had the luxury of indulging in and benefiting from them. But for feminist criticism, this decentering is a decapitation. If feminist criticism abandons the notion of the subject, replacing it with the much more slippery concept of subject positions, and by doing so calls into question the notion of gendered subjects, gendered authors, gendered texts, the ground for its critique is eliminated.

Denying the unitary subject and declaring the end of difference, Neely pointed out, do not eradicate the difference between men and women, the subordination of women, or gender politics. They merely conceal it.

Presentists as well as feminists criticize the historicist construction of the relationship between the subject and the power structures within which the subject is situated. Hugh Grady views the conception of the subject as ‘monolithically determined’ by ‘all-containing structures of ideology and power’ as a metaphorical straitjacket, one that has its origins in Foucault and Althusser. It is possible to escape the straitjacket of ‘monolithically determined’ institutional power, he finds, when we widen our net to consider a broader range of theoretical sources – specifically, the Frankfurt School, Derrida, the late Foucault, Habermas, and Lacan. In doing so, a subjectivity that is an active agent, not merely a passive effect, emerges. It is thereby possible to trace the relationship between power structures and subjectivity as a process, as Grady notes, in which subjectivity has the ability to react against power, rather than merely be interpolated by it (Wolf 216–17). It is important to note that he spells out an alternative materialist approach to subjectivity that has the potential to resist power, as well as be complicit with it (Wolf 14). Like historicists and materialists, but unlike traditional liberal humanists, Grady is working toward an understanding of subjectivity that is historically produced rather than timeless. Yet, in arguing for a concept of subjectivity that possesses a critical rather than a merely complicit relation to emerging forms of early modern English power (Wolf 14, 219, my emphasis), he accommodates the concerns of contemporary feminist, queer, postcolonial, and race theorists alike (Gajowski, ‘Presence,’ 11).

As Lena Cowen Orlin and Phyllis Rackin point out, the refrain, ‘chaste, silent, and obedient,’ has perhaps been repeated with greater frequency by contemporary historicists than it was in early modern England (Orlin 75, qtd. in Rackin Women, 8). We need to continue to understand chastity, silence, obedience, and enclosure, of course, as oppressive prescriptions that attempted to control female behavior in early modern England – in history, as in literature. But we need, as well, to understand female resistance, subversion, unruliness, and disruption in response to these patriarchal inculcations – in history, as in literature. For female resistance is all the more heroic when understood in the context of these oppressive regimes. That is, after all, the very stuff of Jacobean tragedy. Rather than the male heroism that Elizabethan tragedy dramatizes (e.g., Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine), Jacobean tragedy places the female center stage, thereby dramatizing female heroism (e.g., John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil). It is important to note the dialectical relationship between subjectivity and power that structures the drama. Female subjectivity in Jacobean drama, and particularly in Jacobean tragedy, is defined through resistance on the part of individual female protagonists to patriarchal institutions, practices, and discourses. Even as these playtexts dramatize worlds in the thrall of patriarchy, so too do they explore and valorize instances of female subjectivity in crisis under pressure of patriarchal power structures. Kathleen McLuskie’s trenchant observation of a quarter century ago remains valid today:

a feminist critique of the dominant traditions in literature must recognise the sources of its power, not only in the institutions which reproduce them but also in the pleasures which they
afford. But feminist criticism must also assert the power of resistance, subverting rather than co-opting the domination of the patriarchal Bard. (106, emphasis mine)

At the outset of the 21st century, I would expand McLuskie’s priorities to suggest that feminist criticism needs to emphasize the power not only of its own resistance but also the resistance of female protagonists in the dramatic texts of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

5. Hetero/Homo

Returning to that significant moment in contemporary United States history with which I began, the recent Presidential election, I would like to focus on two political developments at the polls (one progressive, one regressive) on Election Day, 4 November 2009, that emphasize the ‘fierce urgency of now’ regarding gender and queer issues. Voters rejected all three anti-choice measures on state ballots, as Katha Pollitt notes. In South Dakota, voters said ‘no’ to an abortion ban with narrow exceptions for rape, incest, and grave risk to a woman’s health or life. In Colorado, home of Focus on the Family, voters refused to declare that personhood begins with conception, rejecting fetal personhood – the foundational doctrine of the ‘right-to-life’ movement – three to one. In California, for the third time in four years, voters rejected a parental notification requirement 52% to 48% (12). From a progressive standpoint, these were solid victories.

Yet, simultaneously, California voters passed Proposition 8 prohibiting same-sex marriage. Like the anti-gay marriage measures that the religious right deployed as a wedge issue on state ballots across the United States during the 2004 Presidential election, Proposition 8 was premised on the belief that same-sex marriage is a recent social development that disrupts an institution that has been historically defined as exclusively heterosexual. Contradicting these right-wing premises, however, stands the historical research of early modern scholars such as Alan Bray, John Boswell, and Alan Tulchin, which demonstrates that precedents exist for same-sex families that are centuries old. According to Tulchin’s recent article on the existence of same-sex unions in medieval France, these marriage contracts, or affrèremen t (literally, ‘brother-making’), included two conditions that were concerned with the disposition of property. First, partners no longer owned property as individuals – all property became the joint property of the couple. Secondly, partners named each other as their heirs, with the surviving partner in the relationship inheriting joint property. They agreed to share one common household, ‘un pain, un vin, un bourse’ (‘one bread, one wine, one purse’) and expressed affection for each other, using the French verb, aimer, as the rationale for entering into the contract (Gajowski, ‘Presence,’ 18–19). As scholars of the past and the present, we have an obligation to use our research to educate audiences outside the academic community in the hope of correcting contemporary stereotypes, such as that about the inherently heterosexual nature of the institution of marriage, that circulate in popular culture, animating and reanimating age-old prejudices.

Significantly, the film, Milk, about the life and death of San Francisco Supervisor, Harvey Milk, recently garnered Oscars – something that was not true of Brokeback Mountain just a couple of years earlier. Did the recent passage of Proposition 8 in California have something to do with it? In his acceptance speech for Best Original Screenwriting for Milk at the Oscars, Dustin Lance Black spoke eloquently of Milk:

If Harvey had not been taken from us thirty years ago, I think he’d want me to say, to all the gay and lesbian kids out there tonight who have been told that they are ‘less than’ by their churches, by their government, or by their families, that you are beautiful, wonderful creatures...
of value – and that, no matter what anyone tells you, God loves you, and that very soon, I promise you, you will have equal rights, federally, across this great nation of ours.

The passage of Proposition 8 on the California ballot because of out-of-state LDS, or Latter Day Saints, support (to the tune of $20–30 million) reminds us of the currency of homophobia in the United States. Conversely, the eloquence of Dustin Lance Black upon accepting his Oscar reminds us that interventions in the dominant ideology are possible. Both Proposition 8 and the screenwriter’s eloquence make queer issues in Shakespeare’s texts and culture not only a viable but also an inevitable – even urgent – concern. Several contributors to the recent collection, *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare* – Linda Charnes, Douglas Green, Adrian Kiernander, Arthur Little, Anthony Patricia, and Bruce Smith – exemplify the variety of contemporary theoretical and critical work in this vein. Charnes (‘Uncivil’) and Little interrogate same-sex marriage; Kiernander, Green, and Patricia examine homoerotic performativity; Smith elucidates the theoretical gender/sex conundrum.12 The intriguing parts of the unfinished business of cultural materialism, Alan Sinfield observes, are those points at which poetic and dramatic texts appear to undermine the hegemony of heteronormativity (29). And, I would add, male supremacy. ‘The times, they are a changin.’ In November 2008, Connecticut joined Massachusetts as the second state in the United States to perform marriages of same-sex couples. In April 2009, the Iowa Supreme Court overturned a same-sex marriage ban and the Vermont state legislature overrode the Governor’s veto of same-sex marriage legislation.

Capturing the moment we are in is not an exercise in solipsism, navel-gazing, indulgence, or self-centeredness. It is, rather, a matter of ethical responsibility, of owning up to the meanings that we construct in Shakespeare’s texts and culture rather than projecting the authority of those constructions – our authority – elsewhere – on the author, the author’s culture, the author’s monarch, the unbearable weight of four centuries’ of theatrical and critical tradition. Shakespeare scholars would likely agree, I think, that none of us can know with any degree of certitude what was in Shakespeare’s mind. All we can do is speculate, to the best of our abilities, given everything our intelligence and our education have placed at our disposal, on what we think was in Shakespeare’s mind. And doing so is a never-ending, always-changing process – ‘Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore’ (Sonnet 60) – depending on our situatedness in time and space as readers, interpreters, actors, directors, audience members, teachers, students. To this extent, Robin Headlam Wells is perhaps correct to point out that all criticism can do is record the history of a text’s reception (60).

Our responses to Shakespeare and his contemporaries depend upon the ‘historical location we inhabit,’ as well as the ‘historical legacy we inherit,’ as Phyllis Rackin eloquently puts it. Historical knowledge includes not only a recognition of the ways our interests, desires, and anxieties construct meanings in Shakespeare’s texts, but also an awareness of the difference between contemporary meanings and those of his original audiences. Both histories, to reiterate Rackin – the present history of the world in which we live, as well as the accumulated tradition of Shakespeare scholarship – shape our experience of Shakespeare (Women 3, 5–6). Both histories, moreover, require intervention on the part of feminists, queers, and people of color in the twenty-first century. By way of concluding my own deliberations on what the Shakespearean map, and our map, might look like in a world ‘Beyond Historicism,’ I leave you simply with the closing words of Elizabeth Alexander – again, from her Inauguration Poem:

In today’s sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,
praise song for walking forward in that light. (40–43)

Short Biography

Evelyn Gajowski has published three books on Shakespeare: Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare; Re-Visions of Shakespeare: Essays in Honor of Robert Ornstein; and The Art of Loving: Female Subjectivity and Male Discursive Traditions in Shakespeare’s Tragedies. An active member of the International Shakespeare Conference, the World Shakespeare Congresses, and the Shakespeare Association of America, she has organized, chaired, co-chaired, or delivered papers in several major paper sessions and research seminars: Presentism: Shakespeare, Sexuality, and Gender Now (2009); The Presence of Shakespeare and War (2007); Performing Shakespeare and Gender in the Present (2006); Shakespeare, Gender, and Sexuality in the Present (2005); Postmodern Pedagogies/Early Modern Classrooms (1993) and Crossdressing (1991). She recently delivered the Keynote Address at the Shakespeare Symposium of the California State University System in Fullerton, CA on (2009) and participated in the UCLA Shakespeare Symposium (2007). As Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, she teaches graduate seminars and upper-division undergraduate courses in Shakespeare, gender theory, gender and early modern English literature, and early modern English drama.

Notes

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I delivered earlier drafts of this essay at a Paper Session titled, ‘Presentism: Shakespeare, Sexuality, and Gender Now,’ at the 37th Annual Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Washington, DC, on 9 Apr. 2009, and as a Keynote Address at the annual Shakespeare Symposium of the California State University System in Fullerton, CA, on 29 May 2009.

1 Charnes is referring a New York Times article written by James Gorman, who, in turn, is describing the research of cognitive scientist Rafael Nunez and linguist Eva Sweetser published in the journal, Cognitive Science. Charnes’s essay, ‘Reading through the Wormholes,’ appeared in Early Modern Culture: An Electronic Seminar, prompting a response essay, ‘Untimely Meditations,’ by Jonathan Gil Harris, as well as a counter-response and a counter-counter-response.

2 Christine wrote a number of texts that defended the female sex against the sharp turn toward misogynist, ribald attacks at the time. In Épitre au Dieu d’Amours (1399), her first text, she deplored the popularity of the Roman de la Rose for its negative depictions of women. In 1402, she continued this criticism of the second part of the Roman de la Rose authored by Jean de Meun (1277), in particular, thereby initiating the querelle de la Rose, France’s first literary debate. In Le Livre de la Cite des Dames (1405), Christine continued the critique of misogyny, thereby initiating the querelle des femmes.

3 Garner’s essay was published in a collection edited by Maurice Charney titled ‘Bad’ Shakespeare, which evolved out of a research seminar of the same name at an annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America.


5 No one has analyzed the misogyny unleashed by the Presidential candidacy of Hillary Clinton and directed toward her personally throughout the 2008 Democratic primaries more incisively than Rebecca Traister. See also Gloria Steinem.

6 In enunciating new historicism, Greenblatt famously began Shakespearean Negotiations with the sentence, ‘I began with the desire to speak with the dead’ (1). Ewan Fernie points out how Greenblatt spiritualizes historicism with this comment (‘Last Act,’ 187), as well as his description of literature professors as ‘salaried, middle-class shamans’ (Negotiations 1, qtd. in Fernie, ‘Last Act,’ 188). Contravening Greenblatt, on the other hand, Terence Hawkes points out that presentist criticism ‘will not yearn to speak with the dead. It will aim, in the end, to talk to the living’ (4).
7 For a representative sampling of book-length studies in this vein, see Lisa Jardine; Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass, eds.; Patricia Fumerton; Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass; Natasha Korda; Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, eds.; and Will Fisher.
8 Throughout this paragraph I am drawing on Harris.
9 In Marxism and Literature, Raymond Williams devotes a chapter, ‘Dominant, Residual, and Emergent’ (121–27), to defining these concepts and the resulting paradigm, introducing them into contemporary English studies. He also coins the phrase, cultural materialism, in the introductory chapter (5), which Jonathan Dollimore, in turn, takes up in the introductory chapter, ‘Shakespeare, cultural materialism and the new historicism,’ of his and Alan Sinfield’s groundbreaking collection, Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism (2–3).
10 One of Greenblatt’s most controversial statements, ‘There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us,’ had its origins in a remark that Franz Kafka had made to Max Brod about the possibility of hope (Negotiations 39). It should be noted that Greenblatt abandoned his reliance on the consolidation/subversion/containment paradigm years ago. I am drawing on Erickson (‘Review,’ 252–3) in this paragraph.
11 Greenblatt made a similarly dismissive comment at a roundtable discussion with faculty and graduate students on the campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in Apr. 1992. In response to a faculty member’s question about the significance of women in early modern England and in Shakespeare’s texts, he declared, baldly, and without missing a beat, ‘There were no women there.’
12 Simultaneously, I should note, several contributors to the same collection – Michael Mangan, Phyllis Rackin, Kathryn Schwarz, Kay Stanton, and I – interrogate contemporary political and social events, as well as Shakespeare’s texts and the discipline of Shakespeare studies, from a feminist theoretical and critical perspective.

Works Cited


FURTHER READING


