IDEOLOGY AND SUBVERSION IN THE
SHAKESPEAREAN SET SPEECH

BY THOMAS CARTELLI

In the opening chapter of Radical Tragedy, Jonathan Dollimore makes a distinction in regard to Montaigne that can be profitably applied to Shakespeare as well. Contending that “We need to recognise . . . how a writer can be intellectually radical without necessarily being politically so,” Dollimore broaches a possibility that is seldom acknowledged by Shakespeareans who assume that the playwright’s apparent political conservatism is firmly rooted in his identification with the received ideas of his time, conveniently summarized in the still influential model of the Elizabethan world picture. Thanks to a new generation of Renaissance scholars, we are now able to recognize that this model itself may be in need of drastic revision, indeed that it may well constitute a unitary myth of our own century’s making, and therefore an extremely reductive view of an age that was actually engaged in an intensive interrogation of its received ideas. It would be premature and equally reductive to apply the insights of these “new historicists” to Shakespeare in a manner that overestimates his intellectual radicalism, that substitutes, for example, a figure of subversiveness in place of that of the wise embodiment of moderation or, at worst, the apologist for Tudor absolutism. As Felix Raab has suggested in his survey of Machiavelli’s reception in Tudor England, though the providentialist assumptions of the past were clearly being threatened throughout the last half of the sixteenth
century and “the outlines of the traditional structure were blurring quickly,” few (if any) Elizabethans were capable of applying anything as systematic as “a Machiavellian critique to the English political scene.” But, as Raab also suggests and as Stephen Greenblatt has recently illustrated, a number of Shakespeare’s contemporaries had become capable of adopting a predominantly “secular approach to political affairs,” one that compelled the more adventurous among them to recognize that a given system of beliefs could be manipulated in such a way as to reveal the porousness of its claims to universal validity.

In the body of this essay, I intend to explore how similar recognitions inform Shakespeare’s treatment of seemingly orthodox dramatic pronouncements in three plays whose approach to prevailing political and religious ideologies is at least contestatory if not, at times, authentically subversive. I would, with Dollimore, like to stress from the start that “what makes an idea subversive is not so much what is intrinsic to it or the mere thinking of it, but the context of its articulation—to whom, and to how many and in what circumstances it is said or written.” This context of articulation is, for our purposes, not only the theater itself with its complex of social variables and economic prerogatives, but the play proper which, in Shakespeare’s case, is often engaged in staging a competition of ideas whose appeal must ultimately be evaluated in dramatic, as opposed to doctrinaire, terms. In order to do justice to the performative framework within which the subversive sometimes makes its presence felt, I take for my immediate subject three (of many) moments in Shakespearean drama when a leading character appears to step forward, leaving temporarily that level of dramatic expression Brecht classifies as “plain speech,” to address an issue that has both specific relevance to the play in question and clear extradramatic implications for the audience-at-large. Such moments are not limited to the plays I plan to discuss, as a brief glance at set speeches in any number of Shakespeare’s plays would indicate. What makes Henry V’s speech on ceremony, Ulysses’ speech on degree, and Portia’s on mercy of particular critical interest is the foregrounding of orthodox ideological content in dramatic contexts that reveal the speakers’ self-investment in the positions they advance and undermine the validity of their pronouncements.

Contexts apart, the Shakespearean set speech itself is ripe for reexamination from an ideological perspective, especially since it
has for so long supplied the focal point for the now widely disputed prioritizing of theme in literary criticism. As an extremely stylized mode of expression that tends to direct itself to subjects that presumably mean as much to its auditors as to its speaker—the wounds of civil war, the nationhood of England, the obligations of royalty, just to mention a few examples from the first and second tetralogies—the set speech occupies a privileged place in the economy of many of Shakespeare's plays. It frequently assumes a decisive role in the performance dynamics of a play as a whole, providing the pivot around which audience responses are elicited and assembled. This prominence of the set speech, however, has occasioned a chronic critical oversimplification of its actual effects on audiences that is directly related to a corresponding oversimplification of Shakespeare's intellectual proclivities. The very formality of the set speech, its rigorous and unusually symmetrical organization, has served to fix or circumscribe its content in more ways than one, making it appear to be the vehicle both of the play's overall meaning or message and of the author's ideological point of view. It is this supposed convergence of formalization, theme, and ideology that I would like to investigate, taking my cue from Terry Eagleton's illuminating summary of Pierre Macherey's discussion of text and ideology in *A Theory of Literary Production*.

Eagleton writes (and I now take the liberty of asking the reader to substitute "the Shakespearean set speech" for Eagleton's "literary text"):

> What Macherey means, I think, is that the literary text throws ideology into disarray by fixing it. By endowing the ideological with a precise, specific configuration, it gives it a certain "foregrounding," but thereby also begins to foreground its limits and lacunae, that of which it cannot at any cost speak, those significations that necessarily evade (but also covertly invade) it. By "formalizing" ideology, the text begins to highlight its absences, expose its essential incompleteness, articulate the ghostly penumbra of absent signs that lurk within its pronouncements.

If we look past Eagleton's rhetorical bravado and perform the substitution I requested, we gain access, I believe, to a splendid analysis of what occurs when John of Gaunt, for example, issues a remarkably moving but just as remarkably porous sermon on English nationalism ("Methinks I am a prophet new inspir'd," 2.1.31–68) in *Richard II*. As Gaunt raises compelling image after image in his

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eulogistic paean to “this sceptred isle,” he simultaneously reveals the nostalgic basis of his own position and the extent of his own investment in the glories of an idealized past, hence the illusory foundation upon which his (and our own if we are English) patriotic fervor is built. Surely audiences of virtually any nationality will respond with an answering fervor to his prophetic intensity when his speech reaches its climax—“Is now leas’d out—I die pronouncing it—/ Like to a tenement or pelting farm” (59–60)—but most will just as surely share at least a little of Richard’s answering cynicism, whose informality tends to “expose” further the “essential incompleteness” of Gaunt’s position.

In short, although Macherey’s point (via Eagleton) may sound suspiciously akin to the Derridean sense of erasure—with which it shares a readerly, as opposed to a performatively oriented point of view—I believe I can make a case for its relevance to a reexamination of the Shakespearean set speech without unduly stretching either the reader’s credulity or Shakespeare’s own range of reference. I can, at the very least, promise that a kind of rough justice will be done to what Eagleton, in the same essay, terms “the cunning of the ideological.”

I. CEREMONY

In his recent essay on tragic form, Franco Moretti states that the purpose of the soliloquy—one of a variety of set speeches I intend to discuss—is “not of promoting the action [of a play] or establishing its implications, but rather of retarding it and making its implications ungraspable.” For Moretti, the soliloquy is essentially a “self-referential” form of “poetry” which is “born from the disjunction of idea and reality” and “can be ‘spoken’ only by one who has lived through an analogous disjunction in his own person—by the sovereign who is unable to unite history and transcendence, action and value, passion and reason. . . .” Moretti is speaking here of soliloquies delivered by tragic characters in tragic circumstances, by characters “whose fall,” in his words, “epitomizes the collapse of an entire civilization.” But I would like to apply his formulation, first, to a different variety of play and character and, then, to a different variety of set speech in order to demonstrate the similar self-referentiality of equally stylized but more superficially thematic forms of expression.

I begin with a speech from Henry V that has been considered sufficiently broad in its range of reference to represent “the the-
matic climax of the entire tetralogy” of which *Henry V* comprises the last part. According to this school of thought, Shakespeare, in Henry’s speech on ceremony (4.1.227–81), is “showing us that at last we have a king free of the crippling disabilities of his predecessors and wise in what the [other three] plays have been teaching.” When Henry addresses ceremony as an “idol,” equivalent to “place, degree, and form” in “Creating awe and fear in other men,” he is (the argument goes) specifically distinguishing himself from the tragically divided Richard II, who confused ceremony with reality and whose reign shattered upon their disjunction. From this point of view Henry becomes the thinking man’s king, fully aware of the political fictions that have made him what he is, but decisive enough to shoulder his lonely burden and get on with being kingly, the artificiality of his civilization’s social constructions notwithstanding. Opponents of this rather conservative or optimistic estimate of Henry’s character have employed the same speech to substantiate their view of a peevish, condescending king, seemingly as incapable as *Measure for Measure’s* Duke Vincentio of seeing criticism as anything other than slander, and as insensitive as *Coriolanus* in acknowledging the validity of the competing complaints of common men. From this perspective Henry becomes more the manipulative Machiavellian than the meditative mirror of English kings.

Rather than attempt to reconcile here what Norman Rabkin has aptly described as the irreconcilability of these two positions, I would like to pursue a more circuitous path through the speech on ceremony in order to uncover the distinctly ideological dimensions of what presents itself as a peculiarly personal form of extended meditation. There is, to begin with, an oddly insular and dissociated quality to Henry’s reasoning in this speech that reveals a closer resemblance to Richard II than has generally been observed, and marks a crucial departure from the Machiavellian character-type (e.g., Richard III) who, with the wink of an eye or a cunning aside, manages to bridge his own alienation by bringing himself into contact with an audience outside himself. What usually makes a soliloquy self-referential, in Moretti’s terms, is its enforced quality; characters like Hamlet and Macbeth have no choice but to speak their bitterness into their hands, isolated as they are by exclusions from normative social exchanges that are sufficiently sustained as to appear permanent. Henry’s insularity, like Richard II’s, derives, on the other hand, from an habitual em-

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beddedness in the prerogatives of kingship that limits the range of
his speculations to the ascriptive pale of royalist ideology. It is also
akin to the insularity of Shakespeare’s Ulysses, who can speak
volumes on “degree” or on the social basis of reputation but is
oddly constrained in the realm of self-awareness, and incapable (or
at least made to seem incapable) of plucking out the heart of his
own mystery. Henry’s estrangement from the common soldiers
of whom he speaks in his soliloquy is, for example, generated by a
prevailing sense of exclusivity that privileges his claim to collective
responsibility at the same time that it restricts the introspective
range of his thoughts:

Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls,
Our debts, our careful wives,
Our children, and our sins lay on the King.
We must bear all. O hard condition,
Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
But his own wringing!

(4.1.227–33)

He is, in other words, buffered by his complete absorption in his
royal prerogatives from anything approaching a more flexible or
less officious response to his dramatic situation.

I place Henry in such company because even in his most private
moments he seems naturally to gravitate toward ideological con-
structs as a means of imaging his condition, of making graspable
that which would otherwise remain ungraspable. It is this in-
grained habit of mind that allows him the freedom to demystify the
role played by ceremony in “Creating awe and fear in other men”
without having also to acknowledge, much less contend with, the
subversive implications of having done so. Indeed, it would ap-
pear that Henry sets ceremony apart as a “proud dream” only to
reaffirm his difference from ordinary men and dramatize the
burdens of his own distinction:

’Tis not the balm, the scepter, and the ball,
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial.

No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
Who, with a body fill’d and vacant mind,
Gets him to rest, cram’d with distressful bread.

(4.1.257–58, 263–67)

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In the process of drawing this distinction between royalty and commons which—"but for ceremony"—endows the latter with "the forehand and vantage of a king," Henry stretches his own position to the breaking point, foregrounds what must appear the unlikeliest argument on behalf of the structures of power to those members of the audience "cramm'd" likewise with the bread of their own earning. Instead of serving to cancel or, at least, qualify the artificial divisions between men enforced by the false idol, ceremony, Henry's speech eventuates in the king's reconsecration of the same hierarchical ideology to which, he would lead us to believe, he is himself royally subjected. If Henry, in his first body, sees ceremony as a mere fiction, he sees it, in his second body, as an undeniable fact of life. By the close of the speech, he has become so oblivious to the soldiers' objections, which stimulated this bout of conscience in the first place, that he also has begun to lose touch with the series of conscious choices that have led to his present predicament:

The slave, a member of the country's peace,
Enjoys it; but in gross brain little wots
What watch the King keeps to maintain the peace,
Whose hours the peasant best advantages.

(4.1.278–81)

Henry speaks here of a peace that no longer exists for the slave to enjoy, of a peace that he has himself cancelled instead of maintaining, and of gross brains that already have demonstrated their capacity to penetrate the trappings of ceremony (e.g., the words of Bates and Williams in 4.1.120ff). In so doing, he turns a potential exercise in self-examination and demystification into an occasion for self-advancement and delusion. But, we ask, to what precise effect?

Responding to such a question depends heavily on posing and answering another: to what effect the set speech? Or, more specifically, to what effect the soliloquy employed by a defensive sovereign in the service of orthodox pronouncement? Strictly speaking, the soliloquy is not geared to produce the same dramatic effects that are produced by a set speech addressed in a public dramatic context that takes more than the isolate self for its theme. It is, instead, geared to bring the solitary speaking character into private and privileged contact with an audience that is led to expect something candid and altogether "unofficial" by the uniqueness of the dramatic moment. Such contact is, however, never really ef-
fected by the speech on ceremony whose presentational style ultimately has more in common with that of the public set speech than with that of the soliloquy.

This slippage of an essentially private form of discourse into the style and structure of public address should, perhaps, be expected in “a remarkably public play” which, as Larry S. Champion observes, “utilizes the soliloquy and the aside to a smaller degree than any other work in Shakespeare’s canon.” In Henry V, the predominately public set speech generally functions as an affective instrument, as a vehicle of bravado or outright propaganda, employed by the Chorus to work the audience up to a leap of the imagination and employed by Henry to work his men up (e.g., “St. Crispin’s” and “Once more unto the breach”) to a pitch of uniquely English heroism. In most instances, it does much to substantiate Stephen Greenblatt’s contention that “theatricality . . . is one of power’s essential modes,” although it does so in a more obvious and direct manner than Greenblatt has in mind. How, then, can so potent a medium of persuasion be considered subversive? Clearly, it would be difficult to identify what Greenblatt terms “the possible presence of genuinely subversive elements” in texts whose function is to smother surmise in a welter of enthusiasm and bravado. The ceremony speech is, however, a text different in kind and function from Henry’s other set speeches, which tend to collaborate with, rather than compete against, the high standard of achievement set by the Chorus’s effusions. Although, in its guise as soliloquy, the speech is geared to give body and form to the “little touch of Harry in the night” that the Chorus, in its most maudlin moment, promises, it is compelled to operate within a dramatic context that is potentially subversive of the prevailing ideology advanced by the play as a whole. Only Henry’s effectiveness in neutralizing the impact of Williams’s eloquently lurid anatomy of the king’s “heavy reckoning”—“when all those legs and arms and heads, chopp’d off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all, ‘We died at such a place’ ” (4.1.134–37)—can determine the extent to which his superficially heterodox soliloquy fulfills the role normally delegated to the orthodox public set speech in manipulating audience response in a partisan manner.

Henry’s emphasis on ceremony as the sole basis of distinction between himself and ordinary men initially promises an ideological breakthrough that will disarm Williams’s grievance of its affective power by giving substance to Henry’s earlier “disguised”
comment that “the King is but a man, as I am” (4.1.101). It soon becomes apparent, however, that Henry’s heterodoxy is a purely rhetorical impulse that mirrors the emptiness of the king’s first body; his speech is a text only the king’s second body can write, its perspective one that only a king who is nothing but king can share. When Henry refers to Williams’s vision of the dismembered body politic at all, he does so by bequeathing it the dreamless sleep of fools, wretches, slaves, lackeys, and peasants—a king’s idea of an Elysium for commoners in exchange for their “profitable labor.” In short, Henry responds to his soldiers’ concern for their own welfare and salvation, first, by privileging the weight of his own royal burdens and, then, by reducing the soldiers to a state of bestial oblivion. He questions the ideological basis of his own condition only to redefine it, generally shorn now of its mythical trappings, in its starkest and most rigid outlines. The feudal relationship between sovereign and subject (elsewhere described by Henry in fraternal terms) is suddenly made equivalent to the relationship between master and slave, indeed, becomes identified with the same insofar as the ground of its being is made plain.

It would appear, then, that far from salving the wound in the body politic dramatically opened during Henry’s interview with his soldiers, the speech on ceremony should serve to widen the breach between subject and sovereign by subverting the basis of their feudal relationship. I say “should serve” because Henry’s inability to employ the soliloquy in a personal, nonideological manner, his frustration with the form itself which requires a first body he does not really possess, casts his actual ideological position in such clear relief that it threatens to reveal, in Eagleton’s words, “that of which [the ideological] cannot at any cost speak”; and because I believe that this threat can be realized only by those auditors capable of standing at a critical distance both from the dramatic context of the speech’s articulation and from the erasure of social dissonance that context seeks to effect. For a contemporary audience, as invested as Henry is in the forms if not the prerogatives of sovereignty, the effect of this rupturing of the feudal contract was probably as limited as the time that elapses between the speech’s conclusion and the beginning of Henry’s ensuing prayer to the “God of battles” (4.1.286ff).

For his part, Henry appears far more comfortable addressing his words to an unseen Other in a prayer that effectively submerges the earlier, potentially subversive moment in a moving strain of

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nostalgia for that lost relationship between subject and sovereign decried in the ceremony speech:

O God of Battles! Steel my soldiers’ hearts,
Possess them not with fear! Take from them now
The sense of reck’ning, if th’ opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them. Not today, O Lord,
O, not today, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!

(4.1.286–91)

This speech seems intended to make as great an emotional claim on its audience as it does on Henry himself by invoking a ceremony of repentant innocence that rhetorically clears Henry of blame for King Richard’s death at the same time that it makes him—in a queer subversion of history itself—the ideological heir-apparent of Richard’s previously subverted belief in divine right. In the dramatic economy of the play, the potential (if not actual) subversiveness of Williams’s vision of the dismembered body politic and Henry’s consequent reduction of his subjects to the status of slaves is counteracted (a very expressive term for what is occurring here) ceremonially by Henry’s reversion to a religious idiom and a providentialist approach to political affairs that transcend an overly problematic secular perspective. The speech on ceremony initiates this reconsecration of sovereignty by privileging the disjunct relationship between the king’s two bodies at the expense of the ruptured relationship between sovereign and subject, making Henry appear subject to his own sovereignty, the reluctant victim of what he perceives to be a palpable but necessary fiction. The second soliloquy, cast in the form of a prayer, sanctions this trans-action by ritualizing Henry’s attempt to submerge himself in a divinely appointed role. In the process, “place, degree, and form” are revalidated on the heels of their own demystification. The imaginary subsumes the real because, in the operations of feudal society, the ceremony of pious speech exerts a disproportionate hold over the minds of men and because, in this play’s reconstitution of that society, it is the nostalgic reconstruction of a hero-king, not what Louis Althusser terms “the real relations which govern the existence of individuals,” which is finally at stake.

II. DEGREE

The same cannot be said in relation to Troilus and Cressida, a play about which it is difficult to say anything for certain except
that it is anti-nostalgic in the extreme. Ulysses’ speech on degree (1.3.75–137) does, however, resemble Henry’s speech on a number of fronts and is similarly motivated by the apparent failure of a dominant ideology to maintain its adhesive hold on the “hollow factions” that have neglected “The specialty of rule.”

The speech on degree is probably the quintessential example of the variety of Shakespearean set speech we tend to classify under the rubric of supremely orthodox expression, just as the commentary it has provoked epitomizes both the oldest and newest strains of Shakespeare criticism. For the Tillyardian school, Ulysses’ speech operates as the thematic center of Troilus. What Ulysses remarks as “neglected” is, the argument goes, what the informed Elizabethan would remark as well; what Ulysses bewails, he would bewail. On the other hand, the more contemporary critic would emphasize the conspicuously Machiavellian slant in Ulysses’ position; she would explain how Ulysses’ argument is mediated by his consciousness of the utility of ideology in manipulating the behavior of men and women. Ulysses becomes, in this reading, less the conservator of traditional values than the conservative manipulator of political fictions, the official propagandist of a ruling class ideology. In each instance, the speech functions as a referential construct, with the (mis)behavior of Achilles serving as its most immediate referent: in the former as an example of what happens when degree is “vizarded”; in the latter as a force of subversion that must be contained in order to restore to Ulysses’ own faction the priority it claims.

I would, however, like to consider the self-referential aspects of Ulysses’ discourse in order to measure the extent of his personal investment in the social dimensions of the seemingly purposive address he delivers: “To end a tale of length, / Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength” (1.3.136–37). My point is not that Ulysses is wrong in his diagnosis of the situation of the Greek army, but that it may be misdirected to extrapolate wholesale thematic applications from so local an anatomy of the “pale and bloodless emulation” that besets the Greek project. Such a formulation may be misdirected because, to reverse an earlier interpretive procedure, Ulysses’ speech may be a species of soliloquy in masquerade. What generically differentiates it from a soliloquy is, primarily, its status as a public pronouncement addressed to attentive auditors and, secondly, the implication that a “remedy” will shortly be offered, hence, that the discourse as a whole is geared
to advance some action and is not, therefore, limited to the realm of abstract speculation. But what, we say ask, is Ulysses’ speech geared to advance? The answer is usually discovered in the vicinity of Achilles whom, Ulysses says, “opinion crowns / The sinew and forehand of our host” but who “Grows dainty of his worth, and in his tent / Lies mocking our designs” (1.3.142–46). It is not made plain, however, until the end of the scene in question when Ulysses delegates Ajax in Achilles’ place to engage Hector in single combat.

Apparently, then, the speech does function in consistency with its presentational style. Depending on one’s critical persuasion, it serves to deflate or foreshorten the thematic career of a political construct, or to demonstrate the accuracy of Ulysses’ analysis of a world eaten up by the “universal wolf” he identifies as “appetite.” But I would suggest that the speech does more than advance the mechanisms of plot or theme, and that Ulysses’ self-investment in the notion of purposive activity provides a crucial clue to Shakespeare’s dramatic intentions. Throughout the play as a whole—which provides the broadest context of this speech’s articulation—Shakespeare repeatedly calls attention to Ulysses’ insularity and sobriety, to his apparent freedom from the undirected self-indulgence that characterizes the likes of Achilles and Patroclus, hence, to the extent of his personal subjection to a symbolic code based on degree that is at once an image and an ideology. Viewed from this vantage point, Ulysses’ speech can be construed as a ceremonial act of self-concealment, as an efficacious rhetorical disguise employed less to conceal a Machiavellian motivation than to submerge his own subjectivity in a language of transcendental signifiers that speaks on behalf of what an eclectic deconstructionist might call the “phallogocentrism” of the law.24

If I am at all correct in my reading of Ulysses’ personal submersion in the values articulated in the speech on degree, it remains to discover what role the peculiarly ideological set speech plays in the dramatic economy of Shakespeare’s productions. Does such a speech serve—in plays as distinct as Henry V, Troilus, and The Merchant of Venice—as the ideological center of gravity, as the central thematic pronouncement of the production in question, or as the representation of Shakespeare’s own logocentric (not to mention phallogocentric) bias? Or is Shakespeare himself sufficiently detached from the ideological projections of his characters to effect their dramatic deconstruction—sufficiently complex in his thinking about the structures of power and their relations to
the structures of speech to make such stylized and settled pronouncements objects of sustained dramatic scrutiny?

As my earlier approach to the speech on ceremony should suggest, I believe Shakespeare was less devoted than many of his characters are to the priority of the word in legislating an accurate appraisal of "the real relations which govern the existence of individuals" and societies. I would further contend that it is particularly in the stylized domain of the set speech that he aims to make us skeptical of the referential nature of words, of their claim to represent an objectively verifiable reality outside themselves. And it is especially in the public set speech that we frequently witness a character's attempt to escape into a well-defined ideological position as a means of transcending the disjunctions between idea and reality he has encountered in the less easily definable world of informal dramatic interactions. A perfect example of this psychologically strategic escape into ideology is supplied at the close of Othello when the Moor dramatically reaffirms his dedication to the Venetian state to the complete exclusion of anything that threatens his imaginary conception of his situation (5.2.347–65). But perhaps I had better explain more clearly the understanding of ideology with which I am working. According to a thesis advanced some years ago by Louis Althusser:

it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that men "represent to themselves" in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there. It is this relation which is at the centre of every ideological, i.e., imaginary, representation of the real world. It is this relation that contains the "cause" which has to explain the imaginary distortion of the ideological representation of the real world. Or rather, . . . it is the imaginary nature of this relation which underlies all the imaginary distortion that we can observe (if we do not live in its truth) in all ideology.25

Returning now to the example of Ulysses, a character who tends to style even his most casual pronouncements in the idiom of the public set speech, we may observe that his notion (presented as our notion) of a world order based on degree is premised on a projection of himself into the largely imaginary position of priority in a power structure he perceives to be threatened by Achilles and Patroclus who "tax our policy, and call it cowardice" (1.3.197). What he represents both to himself and to his auditors, on stage and off, as a condition of nature is, in other words, an "ideological,

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i.e., imaginary, representation of the real world” in whose distortions he is completely invested. Ulysses’ investment in this ideology—and his inability to think himself clear of it—are, moreover, linked dramatically with the psychological investment he has made in a projection of selfhood that is cool and rational, as stable and as constant as the sun “In noble eminence enthron’d and sper’d / Amidst the other . . .” (1.3.90–91), a phrase that even in the playtext Ulysses appears to linger over in a self-reflexive manner.

It is, of course, Ulysses’ characteristic position that he is not subject to the imaginary in the way other men are. And his position would seem to be validated by his genuine detachment from Achilles’ ethos of martial prowess and from Troilus’ disillusionment at discovering the power of beauty to transform honesty from what it is to a bawd. But in the latter instance, Ulysses’ bewildered response to Troilus’ incredulity at Cressida’s betrayal—“Let it not be believ’d for womanhood / Think, we had mothers”—is particularly revealing: “What hath she done, Prince, that can soil our mothers?” (5.2.132–33, 138). Ulysses’ incapacity either to comprehend or countenance Troilus’ association of one woman with all women (which derives from an attitude toward sexual relations as pristine and pure as naïve idealizations of parental love) reveals the completeness of Ulysses’ submersion in the ideology of degree, measures the extent to which his detachment from one imaginary representation holds him captive to the limitations of another. I would also suggest here that what makes Troilus so rich a text and so provocative a play is its commitment to a habit of subversion that serves to demystify each of the drama’s competing ideologies (Trojan as well as Greek), which are revealed, in the end, to be equally imaginary, equally self-referential. Even the presumably choric voice of Thersites, which serves Troilus’ most explicitly subversive interests—“All the argument is a whore and a cuckold, a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon” (2.2.71–73)—can be construed as a self-referential construct that subverts its own authority by means of its unstinting commitment to a self-serving ethic of misanthropy.

I would conclude from these examples of self-submersion in the imaginary that Shakespeare’s lifelong preoccupation with the tension between appearance and reality was not so inhibited by his own presumable submersion in the power structures of his time as to preclude his awareness of their distortions of the actual. I would
also conclude, after Stephen Greenblatt, that the traditional attribution to Shakespeare of sentiments far more orthodox in orientation than those attributed to the likes of Marlowe has as strong a basis in the subtlety of Shakespeare’s subversions as it does in the conservatism of his critics. It is common in Shakespeare for obviously villainous characters to appropriate orthodox positions to advance their own interests; Richard III is a notable case in point. In most instances, however, these misappropriations can easily be dramatically discredited or, at least, placed squarely in the context of moral transgression since such characters tend to operate well outside normative structures of behavior. Free as they are of religious and political orthodoxy, the orthodoxy in question is likewise free of them. Far from being threatened by the theatrical Machiavellism of Richard of Gloucester, belief in the “naturalness” of a right that is divinely or providentially ordered is ultimately enhanced in Richard III or, at the very least, made to seem far more stable than its opposite. It is, consequently, a more volatile matter when supremely orthodox characters like Henry V and Ulysses betray the essentially imaginary basis of their relationships to the world by insulating themselves within ideologically soundproof constructions. The fine-tuned use of value-charged language becomes in such instances symptomatic of the difficulties such characters have in coming to terms with the disjunctions between “history and transcendence, action and value, passion and reason” that obtain in their respective dramatic environments. Their personal investment in their own aesthetic productions—“How could . . . /
The primogeneity and due of birth, / Prerogative of age, crowns, scepters, laurels, / But by degree stand in authentic place?” (1.3.103–8), imperiously asserts a clearly self-interested Ulysses—demonstrates the extent to which their very appropriation of the set speech form resolves the problem of self-expression and functions in the service “of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions.” By having ideologically pure characters like Henry and Ulysses make so apparent the dependence of an entire range of customs and beliefs (in which the audience itself was presumably invested, though not, necessarily, to the extent that their rulers had to be) on such transparently fragile constructs as ceremony and degree, Shakespeare alerts the audience not only to the possibility that its own best interests may not be served by the ideology in question, but to the possibility that the ideology itself may be nothing more than an artificial construc-

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tion. It is, in short, through the very formality of the set speech that Shakespeare calls attention to the ideological status of his characters’ speech acts and thus implicitly subverts the transcendental claims of their pronouncements.

III. MERCY

Frank Whigham has recently observed similar acts of submersion into formal pronouncements in *The Merchant of Venice*, especially in relation to Bassanio’s apparent lack of self-consciousness as he delivers his set speech in the casket scene (3.2.73–107):

Maybe Bassanio is so unreflective as to be unaware of the irony of his words; even his meditations may be so rhetorically ordered to preclude self-consciousness. . . . He may be unconcerned with the tension between the artful form of his meditation and its moral content; aesthetic and moral perspectives often seem askew from one another in this play. Perhaps some such compartmentalization, and the instrumental utility it implies, are part of Shakespeare’s point here.28

Whigham is specifically concerned here with Bassanio’s mastery of the courtier ideology of disinterestedness, and how such mastery guarantees success in his quest for Portia. My concern with the passage is twofold. I am interested in the connection Whigham draws between Bassanio’s un-self-consciousness and the artful ordering of his words, on the one hand, and in the tension Whigham discerns between form and content, on the other. And I am interested in the applicability of Whigham’s notions of “compartmentalization” and “instrumental utility” to an understanding of the “point” of the Shakespearean set speech.

The potential for subversiveness in the set speeches I have already discussed is enhanced by the same lack of self-consciousness that Whigham remarks in Bassanio, the performative ease with which each speaker slips into a stylized rhetorical mode that foregrounds a set of abstract values, but simultaneously embodies the speaker’s most personal projections. In these instances, it is not just the incompleteness of the ideological position that risks exposure, but also the incompleteness of the speaker who has submerged his imaginative freedom so fully in the restrictions of a specific symbolic order that he has effectively alienated himself from the consideration of alternative positions. For Brecht in our own time, a set speech (or “set song”) occasions the alienation (understood by Brecht as the enhancement of self-consciousness) of both actor and audience by explicitly illustrating the actor’s move-
ment from his role as character to his role as commentator or spokesperson, and by conjoining this movement to the play’s corresponding shift from presentation to proselytizing. For Shakespeare, who operates on a “dramatic” as opposed to an “epic” level, the alienation of the actor proceeds in character, as a revelation to the audience of the proselytizing quality in his presentation, hence, of the peculiar lack of tension between form and content. And this occurs most often when the character in question shows no awareness of what Moretti terms a “disjunction in his own person,” and thus applies most directly to the set speeches of Henry, Ulysses, and, I would now add, Portia, which are addressed well outside the pale of a conventional tragic paradigm.

When Whigham turns his attention to Portia, he adjusts his approach somewhat, making her appear more conscious than Bassanio of the “instrumental utility” of the “compartmentalization” of values: he contends that “Portia’s speech on mercy functions precisely as an ideological weapon” and that it “is specifically presented as a compulsion.” Although, like Whigham, I am far from viewing the speech on mercy in a traditionally thematic manner (even in the now traditionally inverted thematic manner, as a document for the defense of Shylock), I would stop short of attributing the motive of willful manipulation to Portia for the very reason that I find Whigham’s anatomy of Bassanio’s behavior so apt. Just as Bassanio is, so to speak, “innocent” of whatever disparity may obtain between the form and content of his speech, so too, I believe, is Portia innocent of consciously employing the mercy speech as an ideological weapon against Shylock. She is guilty, however, of her unacknowledged submersion in the idiom of a dominant ideological discourse that serves to suppress the claim to validity of any alternative discourse that dares to dispute its prerogatives. It is no coincidence that the mercy speech has for centuries been removed from its specific dramatic context to serve as a recitation for schoolchildren, presumably in the interests of improving their skills in oral interpretation, but also in the interests of promoting an ideological position which, taken in isolation, could be disputed only by the most ardent proponent of capital punishment. In short, the mercy speech is an unanswerable proposition that gilds its speaker in the trappings of all things bright and beautiful, allows her to climb to the highest reaches of moral purity, only to cast shadow and suspicion on any deviation from its abstract rule. To say that Portia knows this would be equivalent to saying that

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she also knows that what she is doing is either wrong, improperly motivated, or, at best, instrumentally useful. That she knows no such thing but instead is invested totally in the abstract righteousness of her position and, for that matter, her role (which embodies a gender displacement motivated by her submersion in the dominant masculine structures of power) becomes especially apparent toward the close of the trial scene when she blithely places the power to grant a now severely watered-down version of mercy in the hands of the Duke who, in turn, proclaims to Shylock that he shall presently “see the difference of our spirit” (4.1.366).

The fact that both parties to the controversy are equally wedded to the priority of law over mercy is casually overlooked by both the Duke and Portia who are similarly captive to an ideology which is itself, as Pierre Macherey writes, “a captive of its own limits,” an “enclosed, finite” structure of beliefs that “mistakenly proclaims itself to be unlimited (having an answer for everything) within its limits.”30 Within the specific bounds of the speech on mercy, Portia very plainly demonstrates the extent to which her imagination has been colonized by what Althusser calls “the imaginary,” which, in Portia’s case, takes shape as a religious discourse that purports to transcend seemingly “unresolvable social contradictions” and the existing political arrangements it serves to validate:

But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this.

(4.1.191–96)

I include in this passage Portia’s movement away from the pristine horizons of the set speech proper and into the mode of direct address to call attention to the clearly demarcated ideological boundary that divides the Christian-woman-become-Christian-man, who has the very power to make mercy season justice that she ascribes to God and king, from the Jew who, despite Shylock’s protestations to the contrary, is never anything but Jew in the eyes of the law and Portia alike. Portia’s request to have Shylock “consider this, / That, in the course of justice, none of us / Should see salvation” (4.1.196–98) proceeds from the same self-enclosed perspective that has already rendered Shylock incapable of deciphering a linguistic code premised on rights, privileges, and ways

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of thinking from which he is definitionally excluded. Shylock’s predictably negative response to this injunction is itself predicated on his own embeddedness in an equally insular ideology which enforces his inflexible allegiance to his only form of social protection, the Venetian law. But Shylock’s response is, ultimately, of less immediate concern to Portia than is her own high-minded identification with an unanswerable moral proposition that allows her to submerge humane considerations by becoming their spokesperson.

By summoning up, during a moment of extreme dramatic tension, the image of so transcendent and all-reconciling a value as mercy—“It is twice blest: / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes”—Portia opens up a theatrical vista that promises to cancel that tragic disjunction between idea and reality from which both the soliloquy and ideology are born. Her speech presents itself in the likeness of a signifier seeking its signified in a world the speech claims to reflect, or, in a more psychological vein, in the guise of a private fantasy seeking fulfillment in the ministrations of others. Once Shylock utters his refusal to cooperate, the bright prospects of mercy are irrevocably withdrawn and Shylock becomes the scapegoat for the failure of the entire company to transcend the letter of laws that dehumanize the relationships between citizens and subjects in Venetian society. His assigned status as scapegoat, however, retrospectively reveals the pivotal role played by the mercy speech in the scapegoating process. For Shylock suffers the fate of failing to provide a referent for an alien ideological construct that is actually being employed in a self-referential manner. He becomes the ritual victim for the failure of mercy itself to function in any way other than as a self-sustaining poetic artifact, as a façade of the imaginary that distorts the real conditions of existence as the action of the play depicts them. Sufficiently close readers or attentive spectators are, of course, just as likely to place the speech on mercy in direct critical juxtaposition with Portia’s ensuing “mercifixion” of Shylock, to see it as referring in an ironic fashion to actions that subvert or contradict the authority of Portia’s pronouncements and, hence, make Portia, not Shylock, the true villain of the production. Such a procedure is, to a great extent, consistent with Shakespeare’s own dramatic design. But I believe that in this instance Shakespeare is making another, more subversive point about the ungraspable nature of the set speech’s implications that has little to do with the critical competition be-

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tween villains and heroes, and that makes Portia as much a victim as Shylock of her rhetorical formulation. Although Shakespeare’s contemporary audience was probably too invested in the disparity between Christian theory and secular practice, in the caricatured difference in spirit of Christian and Jew, to draw such a conclusion for itself, the full context of the mercy speech’s articulation makes Portia’s unacknowledged submersion in the imaginary the dramatic mirror of its own. Portia’s initial insistence on mercy resonates with the mercilessness of her ensuing treatment of Shylock in such a way that it renders the very concept indeterminate and her unqualified hold on its validity tragic, insofar as it radically distorts her consciousness of things as they are.

But indeterminate for whom and for how long? Tragic in what sense of the term? No observation regarding the darker implications of the trial scene can confidently be made without at least attempting to account for the way in which “the aristocratic fantasy of Act V” seeks “to obliterate the memory of what has preceded.” Walter Cohen is certainly correct in viewing Shakespeare’s reversion to the idiom of romantic comedy in the fifth act as a “formal effort” intended to reconcile “the socially irreconcilable.” But he is wrong to make the Venetian ideological project appear indistinguishable from Shakespeare’s considerably more complex enterprise. Shakespeare’s attempt to erect formal defenses against the Christian, aristocratic ideology’s “qualification by the alternative and partly oppositional conduct and values of other social classes” strongly suggests his acknowledgement of the dominant ideology’s attachment to the forms and functions of artifice, and casts his reluctant service on its behalf in sharp relief.

Moreover, the oft-noted porousness of the fifth act’s graceful but strained attempt to suburbanize an essentially urban conflict testifies to the play’s inability fully to contain or control the subversive energies released in the trial scene: energies that compel Shakespeare not only to approach what Cohen terms “the formal and ideological limits of Renaissance romantic comedy” but to break through them into a consideration of their tragic implications. Although we may feel, as Dollimore has observed, that such an effort at containment and closure “was a kind of condition for subversive thought to be foregrounded at all . . . we should recognise too that such a condition cannot control what it permits: closure could never retrospectively guarantee ideological erasure of what, for a while, existed prior to and so independently of it.”
It is for this reason, I believe, that the mercilessly degraded figure of Shylock so often shadows the admittedly seductive revels in Belmont both in readings and productions of the play, and probably did likewise in the face of even the most ideologically orthodox Elizabethan. And behind that ineradicable figure lurks mercy like a dream and the grandly inquisitorial Portia, tragic for her failure to perceive her own limitations and for her success in providing cause for tragedy in another.

Although it can be argued (indeed, has been argued) that no form of articulate speech is free of the impress of some ideology, that there is, in short, no escape from ideology, the set speeches I have examined should, at least, serve to document Shakespeare’s consciousness of and detachment from the varieties of self-submersion pursued by a cast of characters whose characteristic eloquence is, not insignificantly, an endowment shared by their playwright-creator. One need not be innocent of ideology to anatomize its workings in others, as our latter-day Marxist critics repeatedly remind us. And, in a strictly formal vein, Shakespeare was as incapable as Othello of telling a “round unvarnish’d tale” in a plain, unvarnished manner. I would, in any event, claim that Shakespeare inhabits the near side of a middle ground between detachment and submersion in terms of his ideological position. And I would add that his detachment has its closest Renaissance analogues in the habit of demystification and in the immunity against the power of appearances Machiavelli and Montaigne appear to have enjoyed. This middle ground and Shakespeare’s place within it are rather nicely outlined by Macherey in a formulation that addresses the relationship between ideology and literary works in general:

A work is established against an ideology as much as it is from an ideology. Implicitly, the work contributes to an exposure of ideology, or at least to a definition of it; thus the absurdity of all attempts to “demystify” literary works, which are defined precisely by their enterprise of demystification.37

It is especially important in the present context to note Macherey’s emphasis on the engagement of literary works themselves in an “enterprise of demystification” since it both restores an interpretive priority to the primary text which much contemporary criticism would deny and redresses the traditional underestimation of a given text’s subversive potential.38 Macherey’s formulation also
articulates a point I have been at pains to make throughout this essay: namely that in the most obviously orthodox pronouncements of its set speakers, Shakespearean drama challenges dominant ideological structures in the very act of using them, indeed, in the very act of being used by them.39 By placing these speeches and their speakers in dramatic contexts that variously contest, subvert, and even radically define the positions being advanced, Shakespeare makes the ideological as sustained a subject of dramatic scrutiny as he elsewhere makes Hamlet’s indecisiveness, Macbeth’s ambition, and Timon’s liberality. That he also makes himself the servant of the very structures he sets out to subvert, that he is often used by his own use of ideological formations to advance the positions he exposes, is a consequence both of the cunning of the ideological itself and of Shakespeare’s commitment to a “most potent art” whose formal devices necessarily resemble those of the dominant discourses it attempts to represent.40

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**NOTES**


2 I have appropriated the term “unitary myth” from Dollimore who disputes the notion that the Tudor myth in particular actually served as a common focus of belief for Shakespeare and his fellow Elizabethans (89–90). Dollimore contends that not only do “most of Shakespeare’s history plays fail to substantiate this (non-existent) unitary myth, but . . . some of them have precisely the opposite effect of revealing how myth is exploited ideologically” (90).

3 In addition to Dollimore, current scholars engaged in revisionist studies of Renaissance literature include Louis Adrian Montrose, Jonathan Goldberg, and Stephen Greenblatt. An immensely illuminating (though not altogether sympathetic) critical overview of the new historicism, with specific reference to the work of Montrose and Greenblatt, is provided by Jean E. Howard in “Is There a New Historicism and What is Its Importance for Renaissance Studies?” an essay that is unpublished as of this writing. My own misgiving echoes Howard’s lack of assurance as to whether “we have found a way to write [historical literary criticism] that does not reproduce some of the assumptions and procedures of a prestructuralist age” (17). Howard is especially critical of the “reductive dualism” she finds at work throughout Dollimore’s *Radical Tragedy*. I share Howard’s opinion of Dollimore’s reductiveness, but also join with her in welcoming his groundbreaking and provocative approach to the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.


5 Raab, 76.

6 In the opening pages of “Improvisation and Power,” in *Literature and Society: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1978*, ed. Edward W. Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), Greenblatt recounts Peter Martyr’s account of how the natives of the Lucayan islands were treated by his fellow Spaniards. Greenblatt’s emphasis falls on the Spaniards’ apparent ability to perceive the ideological

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basis of Lucayan religion, its status as "a manipulable human construct," and their equally apparent inability to come to the same recognition regarding their own religion (58–63). Much the same kind of thought process seems to characterize Shakespeare’s Ulysses, as I suggest below.

7 Dollimore, 10. Greenblatt offers a more comprehensive portrayal of the subversive in "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion," Glyph 8 (1981): "subversive" is for us a term used to designate those elements in Renaissance culture that contemporary authorities tried to contain or, when containment seemed impossible, to destroy and that now conform to our sense of truth and reality" (52).


9 Eagleton’s summary appears to be grounded on A Theory of Literary Production, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 131–33, and specifically elaborates on Macherey’s contention that "Even though ideology itself always sounds solid, copious, it begins to speak of its own absences because of its presence in the novel, its visible and determinate form" (132).

10 Terry Eagleton, "Text, Ideology, Realism," in Literature and Society, ed. Said, 160. Eagleton, it should be noted, admits to having "real difficulties" with the formulations he summarizes. For an earlier, more complete statement of his objections, see Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory (London: New Left Books, 1976), 83–85, 89–95. If his remarks about Shakespearean drama in Criticism and Ideology continue to represent his thinking, Eagleton would probably resist my application of Macherey’s formulation to the Shakespearean set speech: "It is true that Shakespearean drama does not merely 'reproduce' a conflict of historical ideologies; but neither does it press a particular ideology to the point where it betrays its significant silences" (96).


14 Norman Rabkin, Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), 47. Rabkin is playing devil’s advocate here in describing an “optimistic” approach to the play he is, elsewhere in his chapter on Henry V, careful to distance himself from.

15 Rabkin, 60.

16 Cf. Robert Ornstein, A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare’s History Plays (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), who contends that Henry’s "moral awareness is of the mind, not of the heart. He knows intellectually the obligations he does not feel" (189).

17 Henry’s observation regarding the political utility of ceremony closely resembles an even more obviously subversive observation regarding the political function of religion attributed to Marlowe in the notorious Baines Deposition, namely, "That the first beginning of Religion was only to keep men in awe.” Both statements have a common origin in the strong (and generally underestimated) influence of the writings of Machiavelli on contemporary Elizabethan thought. Indeed, Henry’s failure even to acknowledge the apparent heterodoxy of his own position may actually attest to the domestication of Machiavellian modes of thinking in Elizabethan intellectual life. Felix Raab (60–66) provides several interesting examples of the admittedly tenuous coexistence of "modern” materialist perspectives with traditional Christian assumptions in the minds of three Elizabethans, each of whom attempts either to discredit or distort Machiavellian formulations that have clearly made indelible inroads into his characteristic habits of thought.


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20 Greenblatt, “Invisible Bullets,” 42. This is especially the case in respect to those speeches Shakespeare places in the province of the Chorus who, as Robert Ornstein observes, “is not one to examine unexamined enthusiasms” (185).

21 This procedure has much in common with the way in which religious and providentialist paradigms continued to operate in the minds of those contemporaries of Shakespeare discussed by Raab. A particularly relevant example is provided in Raab’s quotation from a letter written in 1540 by “an anonymous correspondent from Antwerp, commenting on European affairs:” . . . my thynkyth that that proverb of Machiavelli, which seyth that when the dawnger of a warre is over oon it is better to prevene it than to defaire them, were very salutiffer for the Fraunce kyng. But God is the worker of all” (49, my emphasis). See Lawrence Dannson, “Henry V: King, Chorus, and Critics,” Shakespeare Quarterly 34 (1983): 40–42, for another account of how Henry’s reversion to a religious idiom functions in relation to the speech on ceremony.


23 After calling attention to the similar rhetorical styles of Henry V and Troilus, E. M. W. Tillyard (Shakespeare’s Problem Plays [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1950]) observes that “in Henry V the spirit of criticism plays on the minor characters who are politicians and may even extend to the man of action in general, if only unconsciously. In Troilus and Cressida this spirit comes right out into the open and is intensified” (see 55–57).

24 Cf. Dollimore; “Troilus and Cressida exploits disjunction and ‘chaos’ to promote critical awareness of both the mystifying language of the absolute and the social reality which it occludes” (44). See Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 188–89, and, especially, Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), 165–75, on “phallogocentrism.” For its linkage with “the law,” see Jacques Lacan, Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1968): “It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the Symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (41).

25 Althusser, 164. In “Text, Ideology, Realism,” Eagleton criticizes Althusser for engaging in “a fairly drastic misreading of Jacques Lacan” in his association of the imaginary with the ideological (150–51). In his more recent Literary Theory, while alleging that “most commentators would now agree that Althusser’s suggestive essay is seriously flawed” and that “it involves some serious misinterpretation of Lacan,” Eagleton concedes that Althusser’s rethinking “the concept of ideology in terms of Lacan’s ‘imaginary’ ” at least constitutes an attempt “to show the relevance of Lacanian theory to issues beyond the consulting room” (172–73).

26 See Greenblatt, “Improvisation and Power,” 60.

27 Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 79. The passage from which this phrase is drawn is worth quoting in full: “ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic productions; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to irresolvable social contradictions.”


30 Macherey, 131.

31 For a far more sustained discussion of scapegoating in The Merchant, see René

32 The term “mercifixion” is borrowed from Harry Berger, Jr., “Marriage and Mercifixion in The Merchant of Venice,” Shakespeare Quarterly 32 (1981): 155–62. Berger, however, is so far from villainizing Portia as to suggest that she “is no less an outsider than Shylock, and her ‘I stand for sacrifice’ is finally not much different from Shylock’s ‘I stand for judgment’ ” (161), thus anticipating in some respects my own conclusion.


34 Cohen, 781.

35 Cohen, 782.

36 Dollimore, 60.

37 Macherey, 133.

38 In Criticism and Ideology Eagleton takes issue with both Macherey and Althusser for appearing “to want to rescue and redeem the text from the shame of the sheerly ideological.” He continues: “It is as though the aesthetic must still be granted mysteriously privileged status, but now in embarrassingly oblique style” (84). Although Eagleton’s point is predictably penetrating and valid insofar as it accurately gauges what Macherey, at least, appears to be trying to do, it overstates the case for a doctrinaire Marxist critique of ideology and, in so doing, underestimates the subversive role art plays as a vehicle of demystification.

39 Cf. Macherey, who contends that “literature challenges ideology by using it.” Macherey continues in a vein that has clear implications for literary studies in general: “If ideology is thought of as a non-systematic ensemble of significations, the work proposes a reading of these significations, by combining them as signs. Criticism teaches us to read these signs” (133). If we apply this rather straightforward statement to the study of Shakespeare, we may recognize that an at least occasionally subversive Shakespeare has begun to emerge not simply because scholars impatient with the orthodox points of view traditionally attributed to him have wished him into existence. He has emerged because we have ourselves become sufficiently detached from a long-sustained critical conservatism whose point of view preferred and thus promoted a Shakespeare formed in its own image.

40 Cf. Greenblatt, “Improvisation and Power” (90): “Shakespeare approaches his culture not, like Marlowe, as rebel and blasphemer, but rather as dutiful servant, content to improvise a part of his own within its orthodoxy.” Although I owe an incalculable debt to Greenblatt’s work, I believe his emphasis on a performative or improvisatory Shakespeare, negatively capable of fading into the woodwork of his culture, is a bit overdone. While Shakespeare may well have been “the servant of the very structures he sets out to subvert,” as I suggest (in the long shadow cast by Greenblatt), he was not, I believe, nearly as “dutiful” or “content” with his culture’s orthodoxy as Greenblatt contends. It may, perhaps, be more profitable to envision him as the reluctant accomplice of what Greenblatt terms the “normative function” of his own artistic medium in the revised version of his article that appears as “The Improvisation of Power” in Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), 253.