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## Is Shakespeare a Political Writer? (Challenges of *cultural materialism*)

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The author discusses the main assumptions of a British school of literary criticism known as *cultural materialism*, which relates literary texts to the new and challenging discourses of Marxism, feminism, structuralism, psycho-analysis and poststructuralism, and raises questions about their status both as linguistic entities and as ideological forces in the British society. Challenging a traditional faith of liberal humanism in 'transcendent', timeless, and universal meanings of literary texts, cultural materialism interprets 'text' as a place where concrete historical power-relations manifest themselves. The cultural materialists speak about 'alternative' interpretations of cultural artefacts, of 'dissident' readings of canonical texts, of 'political meanings' of poetry, even of 'political Shakespeare' (which is the title of a collection of essays edited by Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore, the leading proponents of the school). Like the new historicists in USA, they are mostly interested in ways how the Power establishes and maintains dominance in social, political, and cultural life, how the dominant discourse manages to silence subversive and dissident discourses, and, in the same time, how these discourses manage to express themselves in spite of the instruments of repression.

It has been many years since the Russian formalists refused categorically to search for and recognize "the colour of the flag that waved over the highest fortress of the city" in poetry. By this act they inaugurated what was soon to become one of the fundamental axioms of the modernist sense in literary criticism: poetry, literature, arts in general are autonomous fields and it is beyond any doubt that *the freedom of creation* is their prerogative; they exist – and must exist – regardless of any ideology, any politics, any direct social practice; they are suppressed by a poisoned atmosphere of ideological dogmas and wither away in the wind of political conflicts; they can flourish only in the fresh air of independent spirituality, which has to be free in order to persist creatively, beyond the historical arena of ideological, political, and social struggle. And the Russian formalists were among the first to provide a theoretical justification for this position: in relation to ideological discourse, poetry represents a *different language*, "language in



its aesthetic function”, according to Jakobson; it is a “language beyond mind”, “language-construction”, a “model system of a distinctive kind”, a “higher order organization”. This distinctive quality of poetry is provided by its special medium, including its right to autonomy as well.

Independently of the Russian formalists, the Anglo-American “new critics” also defended the autonomy of poetry with the same fervour and recognized its freedom as the *conditio sine qua non* of its existence. However, unlike the formalists, who perceived poetry first of all as a procedure, they insisted not only on the magic of linguistic transformations, but also on the *moral significance* of poetry, that is on the focal point of a poem where the experience resulting from man’s dramatic encounter with the world becomes a linguistic reality. The term “moral significance” in this context implied the *essential values* of human life, in fact something that provides our existence with a permanent and universal purpose. Such an attitude earned them the noble attribute of “liberal humanists”. Indeed, they defended poetry not only against the influence of ideology, but also against the corrosive impact of “popular culture” for decades. And perhaps they were the last to perceive Literature (and Art) as that particular humanist value which can still save the moral dignity of a human being in this world of technology.

Decades have passed since. In the meantime the world has gone through some terrible tragedies. People gained cathartic experience from these events. Little by little, everything started to be questioned. Everything that the human thought used to revolve around has turned out to be an illusion of *logocentrism* in the era (or state of mind) known as *postmodernism*. The world has lost the centre, said Derrida. And the “periphery” disappeared together with the “centre”. The “central” and “marginal” issues (ideas, values, cultures) cannot be employed any more. The world has turned up before us in an immense diversity of people, ideas, things, phenomena, and forces, presently opposed to each other, which have been aiming to achieve equal status.

Of course, the sense of literary criticism has also changed with this new perception of the world. What is more, it is exactly this sense that gives prominence to the new perception of the world in the most consistent manner. Its old “axioms” lose their axiomatic quality when viewed from this perspective. Well, if everything is perceived through relations and connections, is there a possibility to discuss anything in absolute terms? Can one still refer, for example, to the autonomy of poetry, literature, or arts? Is it still possible to make a clear-cut distinction between the “poetic language” and other types of discourse, as well as keep it apart from them? Does poetry really deal with some permanent, universal, essential values of our world? And do such values really exist? Indeed, is it possible to establish firm, invariable, permanently given meanings in poetic texts – in any texts? Is it not true that the whole of literature is only a part of History, in fact, that vast area of life which is continuously changing form and where fierce battles have always been fought with new, revealed or hidden goals in a more or less blatant manner? The idea of Literature as an autonomous and free creative activity, which builds an independent world upon its own principles, has disappeared as an illusion.



Furthermore, its Language, a “special discourse” and former pledge of its freedom has turned out not to be completely independent of the other types of human discourse, especially not of the political discourse, the discourse of Power.

Instead of the fresh air of “aesthetic autonomy”, nowadays literature frequently shares the arena of historical life with other “discourse practices”. The discourse of literary criticism offers the following statements more readily: “Literature is a field where veiled battles between the dominant discourse of Power and subversive aspirations of marginalised social groups have been fought.” Or: “Generally speaking, the main production effect in culture is the *reproduction* of the existing order.” Or: “Shakespeare is one of the sites where ideology is worked out.” Or: “Shakespeare serves to provide for the cultural privileges of the favoured class.” Or: “Neither literature nor art can be separated from other social activities, or subordinated to some other, special immanent rules.” All of these slogans have been used over the past two decades by “new historicism” in the United States and *cultural materialism* in Great Britain.

The following lines discuss the second school of literary criticism in more detail.

In order to explain the purpose and goals of the movement which calls itself *cultural materialism* I give the following typical example.

Alan Sinfield (b. 1941), professor at Sussex University and one of the most significant representatives of *cultural materialism*, reminds us – in his polemical study “Cultural Heritage and the Market”, published in 1994 in the second edition of the popular collection *Political Shakespeare*<sup>1</sup> – of an issue which made the British headlines in April 1991, when Prince Charles voiced his lamentation over the situation in the British education system. Well, having expressed his worry over the fact that the technical, practical, vocational, and commercial trends in secondary schools had displaced the traditional values of British culture, along with complete literature, Prince Charles asked in public, “Do we really want to accept a situation whereby school children are rarely introduced nowadays to the literary masterpieces of bygone ages?” Of course, the question primarily addressed the position and role that the greatest of all traditional values in the English culture should have in educational system – the English *cultural icon*, the great Bard, William Shakespeare. According to a survey, his works have become less known even among the UK citizens with secondary education. “Yet his roots are ours”, opined Prince Charles, “his language is ours, his culture is ours; hanging onto our cultural roots is one way of preserving those national identities.” Both the government and the press supported the Prince’s warning. The then Prime Minister, John Major, also commented on this problem at the following annual conference of the Conservative Party, “School teachers should know how to instruct their students to read great literature without wasting time on political discussions about race, gender, or class”.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly it was decided that new curricula should be

<sup>1</sup> *Political Shakespeare, Essays in cultural materialism*, ed. by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Manchester University Press, 1985; - 2nd revised and expanded edition 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Sinfield, ‘Heritage and the Market, Regulation and Desublimation’, *Political Shakespeare*, quotation, pp. 262-263.



prepared. In the test instructions for the final examinations of primary education students, the requirements were the following: first, to use the “standard English language”, and second, to demonstrate their knowledge of certain of Shakespeare’s works. All of this seemed very natural and logical, until the *new leftists*, especially “cultural materialists”, decided to participate in the discussion and interpreted the whole issue in a radical way by pointing out a hidden purpose of this action. According to them, the Conservatives used this intervention in education with the intention to execute the final *appropriation* of both the English language and English culture. How could they achieve that? Having insisted on the so-called “standard English language”, they, in fact, wanted to confirm the exclusive legitimacy of the “variety of the English language spoken by the middle-class white population of south-eastern Britain” (according to Sinfield’s definition of the “standard English language”), thus depriving other races, classes, and regions of their right to use their own idioms. A British person who does not speak his/her “standard English language” is a second-class citizen. And the demand for knowledge of certain of Shakespeare’s works was accompanied by detailed instructions on how they should be interpreted, so “the knowledge of the Bard” actually aligned with the “interpretation” required in the curriculum.

The re-examination of this “interpretation” revealed that the curriculum authors had closely followed the principles of “liberal humanism” of the 1930s with the typical faith in absolute, eternal, and universal values of human life. However, “cultural materialists” warned that these “timeless values” were, in fact, the values of a single world that had persistently defended its privileges: this is the world of white, male, Christian, and bourgeois culture in the country which had become the meeting point of various, often quite antagonistic, cultures ages ago.<sup>3</sup> In this context even Major’s warning to teachers that they should abandon “political discussions about race, gender, and class” and turn to Shakespeare instead, was exposed as a nervous move of the “centre” under the growing pressure of marginalised social groups. They insisted on questioning the traditional *centres* of British culture, including also its dominant “token”, William Shakespeare, who had been “claimed” by conservative England.

In the conclusion of the “case”, Alan Sinfield reminded us that racism, class prejudice, misogyny, and homophobia partly resulted from a superstitious fear of contamination with anything that is different. However, he also warned that vested interests and fears are at work here. Due to the fact that subordinated and marginalised social groups have nothing to lose in that social system, they can fight hard for the assertion and demarginalisation of their own culture, which is usually termed “sub-culture”. In order to prevent

<sup>3</sup> The subject under discussion may be best illustrated with an observation on contemporary British society presented by Emrys Evans in her study “Reading Against Racism”: “A very few individuals can explore their origin... without coming across an evidence of its complexity in the past five or six generations. Nevertheless, it seems that some people still nurture a strange desire for that invented homogeneity of culture which has been dangerously labelled purity. The terms favoured by the Nazis still continue to haunt us.”



this, the dominant social groups have to declare them inferior and thus subdue them. The *Times* quoted one of the authors of the school reform who said, “First of all, the cultural tradition of students is firmly founded on English literature. And according to a thought about history, you cannot know either who you are or where you are *now* if you do not know who and where you *were*”. “That is right”, Sinfield commented on this statement, “however, neither all of *us* were in the same place, nor are we all very satisfied with our present position”.<sup>4</sup> So, an action taken by authorities, which seemed to be perfectly “natural” and “normal”, was affected by the sceptical thought of postmodernism, which – following the ideas of Marxism, feminism, postcolonial criticism, and theory of the marginalised social groups – exposed the action as an act of *appropriation*, used by the dominant social group in order to usurp the cultural sphere in its entirety, and maintain the strict division between the “centre” and the “margin”.

It is exactly this readiness to get involved in the controversy with their own time that marks the feature which makes the essential difference between the British “cultural materialists” and the American “new historicists”, while having in mind that the two groups share the basic views of both culture and history.

Both “cultural materialists” and “new historicists” describe culture as a struggle between the two opposed objectives: the “dominant discourse”, or the “discourse of Power”, which aims to include and put everything under control, and the objective of subordinate or dissident powers (the oppositional political ideas, marginalised social groups or subversive creative tendencies) to resist the discourse of Power and display both their willingness and strength. However, while the American “new historicists” do not believe in the possibility of change, because they are convinced that the “discourse of Power” is strong enough to keep all subversive tendencies under control, so there is no point in being politically engaged, “cultural materialists” are much more optimistic in political terms and believe in social change and, consequently, in the purpose of political engagement.

What, in fact, is *cultural materialism*?

According to a definition given in the foreword to the first edition of the book *Political Shakespeare* (1985) by Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore (b. 1948), who are the principal proponents of the “school” along with Catherine Belsey (b. 1940), *cultural materialism* studies the implications of literary texts in history” in the context of “the new and challenging discourses of Marxism, feminism, structuralism, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism”. On the one hand, these critical discourses have, in their own opinion, brought a new rigour and excitement to literary discussions, but on the other, they “have raised profound questions about the status of literary texts, both as linguistic entities and as ideological forces in our society”.

Having explained, in the same text, the background of this approach, Sinfield and Dollimore described *cultural materialism* as a combination of four methodological views.

<sup>4</sup> Sinfield, p. 257



First, they focused on *historical context*, which provided a framework for literary text where it was given its significance. As a result, they questioned the belief in the “transcendent”, timeless and universal significance, which was traditionally accorded to literary texts by the liberal and humanistic approach. The history of literary text, which had been widely ignored by the American “new critics”, can be recovered only through observation within the context. However, the meaning they attached to “the history of the text” differed somewhat from the one given by traditional literary historians, who recognized the *reflexes* of social, economic, political, and cultural lives of a certain period within the text. Cultural materialists were convinced that “text” reflected historical life as much as it *participated* in it. The text is a site where “power relations” are manifested and evaluated. This is the main reason for their prevailing interest in the relation between the text and modern phenomena, like specific forms of resistance to power structures, or various measures taken by the authorities to keep the subversive or dissident forces under control. The former cases include an open expression of attitudes against monarchy and religion, or unrestrained masses during national holidays (known as the *carnival instinct* according to Bakhtin), or even public disclosure of “sexual perversion”, all of which have been treated as dangerous and therefore severely punished deviations in terms of both natural laws and moral norms.

Second, Sinfield and Dollimore provide a *theoretical basis* for their method, thus overcoming the limits of “liberal humanism”, which only reproduced the meaning of literary texts by means of the so-called immanent criticism (*close reading*) and translated them into its own critical idiom, without any wider theoretical basis. And their theoretical method implies the acceptance of numerous theoretical solutions found by structuralism, poststructuralism, and other contemporary forms in literary criticism, which introduced not only some new theoretical categories into literary discussion, but also the new systems of thinking.

Third, they argue that *political engagement* basically presupposes any cultural criticism. In this context, the two scholars strongly support socialist and feminist ideas, confronting them with the conservative ideology of “liberal humanism” in literary criticism as well as *Thatcherism* in British politics.

Fourth, they adopt the method of *textual analysis* in the belief that theory proves valid only when confronted with concrete texts. As far as the text interpretation is concerned, they follow the established values of the traditional approach of analytical criticism, which, according to them, should not be ignored by any modern school. What is typical, however, is that they, almost without exception, draw upon the literary texts from the canon, because they represent national and cultural “tokens”, thus holding constant the attention of literary criticism and society, which first of all refers to Shakespeare. Works lacking this significance and public attention usually do not belong to the fields where ideological battles are fought and ideologies worked out, so they leave them aside.

As Sinfield and Dollimore explain the *name* of their “school”, they remind us in the same text that there are two ways of using the word “culture”: the *analytic* one, used in



the social sciences and anthropology, seeks to describe “the whole system of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relations with the world”, and the *evaluative* use, more common in the history of arts and literature, where “culture” implies the possessor of superior values and a refined sensibility engaged with “good” literature, art, music, and so on. *Cultural materialism* draws upon the first, analytic sense of culture, and as a result displays the same interest in work on the sub-culture of marginalised social groups, and “popular culture” (film, television, popular music, etc.), as well as on “high culture”, which is only treated as *one* of the “discourses”. (According to them, problems with “literature” are related to the fact that it is perceived, and imposed, as a discourse of the Centre, whereas all other forms of culture have been rendered subordinate or marginal from its perspective, which is why they come into constant conflict with each other.)

As far as the term *materialism* is concerned, which is used in the name of the “school”, Sinfield and Dollimore confront it with the *idealism* of “new criticism” and “liberal humanism”, which recognize “transcendence” not only in literature and culture, but in history and the human life as well, and seek to establish the values believed to be eternal. “Cultural materialists” insist, however, that “culture does not (cannot) transcend the material forces and relations of production”:

Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, nor can it be independent of it... A play by Shakespeare is related to the contexts of its production (the court, patronage, theatre, education, the church). Moreover, the relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, for culture is made continuously and Shakespeare’s text is reconstructed, reappraised, reassigned all the time through diverse institutions in specific contexts. What the plays signify, how they signify, depends on the cultural field in which they are situated.<sup>5</sup>

(In accordance with this view, the essays included in the collection *Political Shakespeare* by Sinfield and Dollimore do not only discuss Shakespeare’s texts, but the institutions and media which reconstruct and reinterpret his works as well.)<sup>6</sup>

At the end of the foreword to the book *Political Shakespeare* Sinfield and Dollimore point out that “cultural materialism” does not make pretensions to political neutrality:

It knows that no cultural practice is ever without political significance – not the production of *King Lear* at the Globe, or at the Barbican, or as a text in a school, popular or scholarly edition, or in literary criticism, or in the present volume cultural materialism does not, like

<sup>5</sup> *Political Shakespeare*, ‘Foreword to the first edition, 1994, p. viii.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Alan Sinfield writes polemically about the position of Shakespeare in the English education system and, in particular, about the role played by the Royal Shakespeare Company in creating Shakespeare’s myth. Graham Holderness re-examines the institutional presentation of Shakespeare in film and television, while Margot Heinemann interprets Shakespeare’s reading as dissident with reference to institutionalized “readings”.



much established literary criticism, attempts to mystify its perspective as the natural, obvious or right interpretation of an allegedly given textual fact. On the contrary, it registers its commitment to the same transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class.<sup>7</sup>

This final definition of the “school” of “cultural materialism” in terms of its programme very clearly points to its theoretical and ideological grounds. But these are not hidden by their founders either. In the introduction to the same collection Jonathan Dollimore is quite explicit: the term “cultural materialism” is borrowed from the leading British critic of Marxist orientation, a distinguished professor of drama from Cambridge, Raymond Williams (1921-1988), who wrote the afterword to the same book. And it should be noted that the renowned Welshman dedicated his entire career to the study of culture as a spiritual realm which is created in the interaction between social relations, cultural institutions, and forms of subjectivity, and which results from material history (that is, concrete forms of social and economic life). His works *Culture and Society* (1961), *The Long Revolution* (1965), *Marxism and Literature* (1977), *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980), and many others, have, according to Dollimore, provided theoretical ground for their approach to literature and culture – along with the works of European structuralists and poststructuralists of Marxist orientation (Althusser, Macherey, Gramsci and Foucault).

However, a strong incentive to their political engagement came from the determined opposition to the rightist policy of *Thatcherism*, which created the “market society” during the nineteen eighties, thus eliminating all the objectives achieved by the Labour government after the Second World War in an attempt to create a social system whereby the state undertakes to protect the well-being of its citizens (the so-called *welfare state*). That particular political situation (that is, the social policy of Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative government) constitutes the political context in which “cultural materialists” approached the reinterpretation of Shakespeare, Webster, Wordsworth, Dickens, Tennyson, and the post-war British literature.

The starting point for these interpretations was that literary texts assume a historical role (either past or present) given by *power relations*: they are either “appropriated” by the “dominant discourse” and integrated into it; or interpreted to blunt their possible subversive or dissident expression; or they are accorded a universal significance in such a way that they lost any concrete reference to their historical moment, and consequently the power to act in that time. This is why the critics from this school were assigned to reinterpret the well-known texts and free them of any significance that disagreed with the “dominant discourse”, or that clearly revealed its gaps. Therefore cultural materialists speak of the “alternative” interpretation of cultural values, of the “dissident reading” of works integrated into the discourse of Power, of the “political significance” of poetry, even of “political Shakespeare” (a syntagm marked by their opponents as a pure oxymoron because they perceive the Bard high above the “triviality of daily politics”).

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<sup>7</sup> *Political Shakespeare*, quotation, p. viii.







According to cultural materialists, the text is not a mere reflection of historical events, but their active participant. It is one of the sites where *history* happens, and just as much a site where *historical battles* are fought. (At the same time, it is also the only site where the present directly encounters the past in this “foreign country” which can be reached only by tracing its preserved texts.) However, cultural materialists are not interested in the battles fought with weapons, at the battlefields, and military conflicts; in fact, they have no interest whatsoever in the history describing wars and recording shifts on thrones. Just like new historicists in the USA, they pursue an interest in “power relations”, and specially the way in which the “power” or “Authority” establishes and maintains domination over the social, political, and cultural spheres, thus keeping under control any forms of resistance. In other words, they are mainly interested to see how the dominant discourse controls subversive and dissident discourses, and as a result, how the mentioned discourses, despite such repression, become prominent enough to challenge the operating system of Power.

Of course, the term *Power* employed here was introduced into the postmodernist concept of history by Michel Foucault, whose ideas exerted a profound influence, in particular over the American new historicists. Unlike them, the British cultural materialists, mostly influenced by Raymond Williams, quite readily apply Marxist terms, such as *ideology* and *hegemony*. But they also employ the terms “dominant discourse”, that is, a form of speech, thought, and behaviour which represents a set of values, as well as real interests of the dominant social group, and “dissident discourse”, which finds a way to escape control and express the views and interests of marginalised social groups.

The present use of *discourse* implies, as always, all semiotic systems, not only language, literature, philosophy, science, etc., but also such social institutions as education, judicial system, the church, in fact *anything* that produces and transfers meaning. The discourse gives shape to a certain society, but also to the perception of society itself. Since the discourse becomes a reality through material forms, it is the only reliable pathway to history. As a result, it turns into a force which plays a crucial role in *shaping our* perception of the past as well. However, it is very important to cultural materialists that the historian perceive the difference between different layers of discourse, especially between the features from the past, the ones dominant in the present, and heralds of the future, as well as between the layers which support the interests of the ruling class and those which express views of the subordinate and marginalised social groups. (In this context Raymond Williams strongly influenced cultural materialists with his differentiation between different layers of discourse presented in the book *Culture and Society*).

When history is viewed from this perspective, it seems logical that such an important role has been assigned to the text, which actively shapes the dominant discourse of its time and at the same time assumes a form of its material realization. Since the text continues to exist in a steady process of interpretation and reinterpretation, it also



participates in the shaping of the dominant discourse of the future, even of our own time. Therefore, Sinfield's radical statement that "Shakespeare is a site where ideology is worked out" should be perceived in this sense.

In fact, "cultural materialism" is one of the forms in which the modern sense of literary criticism returned to history. While the majority of literary historians interpret literary texts as *the products of history*, cultural materialists perceive them as the "functional components of social and political formations", which in fact *produce history*. In this context they do not give priority to literary works over some other types of texts. The fact is that literary works are only one of many types of texts which constitute the discourse of the time and by means of which the forces of history fight their own battles. Like "new historicists" in the USA, cultural materialists also establish the "dominant discourse of the time" by reading and interpreting *all* types of texts, not only literary works, but other preserved historical documents as well: decrees, medical records, private letters, travel books, police files, court and church proclamations, ethnological and anthropological elaborations, historical anecdotes and so on. These documents constitute what is usually known as the "historical context". This means that the word "context" does not refer to something *after* or *before* the literary text, but to its "existential background" which helps to explain the given text. Regardless of type, the text is an integral part of the historical context; it is a constituent element of history itself, and as a result always abounds in aspirations of its time (as well as resulting failures); it manifests, with more or less awareness, the contradictions of inherent culture.

However, in their return to history, cultural materialists do not follow the guiding ideas of most contemporary literary historians, who, seeking to create a certain *system*, try to establish a relation between literary works of bygone ages through a coherent "structure of a higher order" (*Zeitgeist*, "style of the epoch", "vision of the world", "stylistic formation", etc.). According to cultural materialists, history does not produce any universal, coherent and harmonic unities due to constantly provoked, more or less open, conflicts of opposed interests, which is the reason why each epoch is marked by diverse and often completely contradictory objectives. In this sense, Sinfield and Dollimore (as much as Stephen Greenblatt in the United States) take a distinctive attitude towards one of the most significant books on the study of Shakespeare, *Elizabethan World Picture* (1943) by E. W. M. Tillyard, who portrayed Shakespeare's age as a period of social stability and cohesion with the partial class interests under control for the sake of universal national interests and in which a shared "world picture" prevailed. Tillyard notes that the "Elizabethans" fostered a universal awareness of themselves and their past, cosmology, morality, aesthetic ideals and political aspirations. Their shared vision of the world was expressed, according to Tillyard, in the most representative works of that age, first of all in Shakespeare's plays, which gave it absolute prominence in the most complex way.

Tillyard's study, which used to be hailed as a historical synthesis establishing successful links between social life, religious, philosophical and political ideas, and artistic works of the epoch, was generally accepted as a literary and historical work intended to counterbalance the ahistorical, immanent approach of the "new critics". However, cultural



materialists, just as new historicists, perceive Tillyard's study as a "monological type" of literary history (the term borrowed from Greenblatt), which is insensitive to the historical dialogue of opposed forces and fails to see the conflict of interest and the contradictions of social life due to the illusion of harmony. Tillyard's picture of the Elizabethan age established, in fact, "metaphysics of order" (Sinfield), and passed the dominant discourse of that age for a universal "world picture", when the former had been based on the ideology of the ruling class that disguised their interests as shared interests of the nation, thus "confirming the ideological legitimacy of the prevailing social order" (Dollimore).

Unlike cultural historians, who revealed coherent "cultural formations" in bygone times, cultural materialists kept in mind that "a complex society could never be homogenous", which accounts for the fact that each culture is always "multi-layered", "disunited" and "filled with dissonant tones" (Dollimore). According to them, *culture is material*, which is to say that it is produced by a given society at a certain moment, and thus contains all social contradictions of its time. In this respect cultural materialists follow in the tracks of Raymond Williams and other British Marxists, who defined history as a conflict of opposed ideologies, and historiography ("historical narrative") as a "discourse of the winner", or a narrative in favour of interests displayed by the ruling class. (It is absolutely clear that literature plays a prominent role in this sphere too.)

The subject under discussion is, beyond any doubt, a different view of history and the position of literary text in history, as well as the entire complex phenomenon known as *culture*.

Just as Stephen Greenblatt termed his view of literary history "cultural poetics", cultural materialists also approach literature as one of many forms of culture: not as an autonomous system of values, but as one of the ways to form social awareness, as well as the identity of human personality. In the same context, they argue that the interpretation of cultural phenomena (also including literary texts) calls for the same capacity for *close reading*, which had been developed in literary criticism by the "new critics", and the same sense of detecting gaps, contradictions, and aporias in the text developed by post-structuralists. However, they also report that the interpretation of cultural phenomena demands that particular type of "ideological critique" which had been developed in Great Britain by Stuart Hall (b. 1932), from the University of Birmingham. In his cultural analyses of the media Hall perceives texts as fields of political and cultural struggles, and specially as a field where two opposite historical intentions are confronted: the intention of the dominant discourse is to keep the text under control and the intention of the text to resist this control and allow for the possibility of dissident reading. (Dollimore called this the "internal dissonance" of the text which provides for various alternative readings.)

Since a historical era is not, and has never been, a universal and coherent political, cultural and social formation in which all people share the same "world picture", as Tillyard imagined was the case in the Elizabethan era, but rather, always abounds in different, mutually opposed interests, cultural materialists decided to identify "power relations" in the preserved *textual traces* of history (this term is also borrowed from Greenblatt). These power relations explain the aporias of a certain text and its ideological contradictions, or



what Pierre Macherey called “differentiating text from itself”. However, they did not intend to confront their own interpretations with the previous ones as the only right, natural and logical, but indicated that interpretations are always *political*, and they, in fact, imply a political position of the interpreter (even if he/she is not aware of this position). They do not seek to replace the “old” interpretation with a “new” and “modern” one, but to re-examine the cultural values as well as the beliefs underlying the traditional interpretation of these values. This results from their belief that traditional criticism controls both the literary *canon* (that is, the acquired set of “values”) and its critical interpretations on grounds of some deeply conservative social and political norms. In fact, interpretations given by cultural materialists differ from the traditional ones, not only in terms of value criteria, which have been opposed to both the criteria of liberal humanism and formalism, but also in terms of their strong support for alternative social and political perceptions, specially regarding the issues of race, gender, sexuality and class.

For example, in his detailed study of the English Renaissance drama (*Radical Tragedy*, 1984) Dollimore pointed out that almost all of its traditional interpretations mostly insisted on idealistic and essentialist categories, and thus explicitly championed a conservative political idea. According to Dollimore, critics like Bradley, T.S. Eliot, T. E. Hulme, F.R. Leavis and Archer focused in their works solely on the analysis of character, morality and human destiny as timeless, unchangeable and universal human phenomena, which seemingly have universal and essential value:

...essentialism, rooted as it is in the concept of centred structure and determining origin, constitutes a residual metaphysic within secularist thought which, though it has not entailed has certainly made possible the classic ideological effect: a specific cultural identity is universalised or naturalised; more specifically, in reaction to social change this residual metaphysic is activated in defence of one cultural formation, one conception of what it is to be truly human, to the corresponding exclusion of others.<sup>8</sup>

Cultural materialists and their conception of critical activity consider the “Shakespeare case” to be particularly paradigmatic. A considerable number of books were published in the nineteen eighties pointing to a perception of Shakespeare and the English Renaissance drama, as well as radically innovative literary theories.<sup>9</sup>

Just like the new historicists in the United States, the British cultural materialists proved very successful in promoting their beliefs in this particular field. Why this field? And why the example of Shakespeare?

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, second edition, 1984, p. 258

<sup>9</sup> Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, 1980; Sinfield, Alan, *Literature in Protestant England 1560-1660*, 1982; Dollimore, Jonathan, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 1984; Belsey, Catherine, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*, 1985; Dollimore, Jonathan and Sinfield, Alan, eds, *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in cultural materialism*, 1985;





First of all, it should be noted that Shakespeare, more than any other writer from the past, still *exists* in a very active form, and perhaps nowadays more than ever before. His plays are performed in theatres all over the world. London theatres alone feature as many as ten of his plays on their repertoires at the same time, which are, of course, the principal attraction of the cultural life in London. The *London Shakespeare Company*, which is almost exclusively dedicated to his plays, has been the most prestigious British theatre for decades. The recently reconstructed *Globe Theatre* on the right bank of the Thames, where mostly Shakespeare's plays and works of his contemporaries have been performed, is one of the most attractive destinations for tourists from all over the world. Expensive and very successful films have been based on his plays. (And not only on his plays: let us just remember the recent film *Shakespeare in Love!*) Shakespeare is the central subject of many new books, studies, and essays. (Not just critical works: the new novel *Gertrude and Claudius* by John Updike deals with the "events" that seemingly preceded *Hamlet*.) Many popular, scholarly and critical papers on his works continue to be published. He has been included in the reading lists around the world. He is the subject of many studies at universities. And the point is that all these activities include an army of people who live on his fame and thus do their best to keep it alive. (*Bardbiz* is a semi-ironic term used to denote the "business with Shakespeare", which brings in an annual profit of hundreds of millions of pounds to British economy, and accumulates great wealth for many individuals.) It was exactly this critical confrontation with this developed "industry", which has maintained Shakespeare's position of a *cultural icon* in the market with great financial success, that prompted cultural materialists to question the traditional interpretations of Shakespeare, which in fact constitute the spiritual basis of this lucrative business. In their opinion, these interpretations have been, with more or less intention, completely ideological constructions, and as such they maintain the hegemony of *one* culture. It is a male, white, bourgeois, colonial, Christian, imperial culture which places itself in the centre of civilization and treats everything else as inferior, marginal, and irrelevant. This culture has *appropriated* the old Bard and put him into its service. Cultural materialists, on the other hand, listen to some other voices in Shakespeare's plays, which articulate different sensibility and express a different relation towards the issues of sexuality, religion, race, class, and gender, thus seeking to come up with the alternative to the traditional humanistic use of literature through which it maintains the well-established moral and social order. Having chosen the alternative, *political* reading of both Shakespeare and his contemporaries, they have made room for the "dissident discourse". In this way they have joined the feminist, postcolonial and neo-Marxist criticism of modern culture, and in

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Drakakis, John, ed. *Alternative Shakespeares*, 1985; Tennenhouse, Leonard, *Power of Display: Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*, 1986; Holderness, Graham, ed., *The Shakespeare Myth*, 1988; Greenblatt, Stephen, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy*, 1988; Holderness, Graham, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama*, 1992; Greenblatt, Stephen, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 2002.



particular a type of criticism which is known as *gay/lesbian criticism* or *queer reading*. (Alan Sinfield became particularly involved in this field with his recent papers<sup>10</sup>.)

However, it is a paradox that cultural materialists should have tried so hard to snatch Shakespeare away from the power of traditional literary criticism (“liberal humanism” and “formalism”), in order to situate him in the context of modern politics, when they have themselves entered *Bardbiz*, or the “business with Shakespeare”, themselves, giving it a fresh impetus with their ideas. (Indeed, many ideas by cultural materialists have become – after a longish period of refusal – an integral part of modern theatre, film and critical interpretations of Shakespeare.) The marketing of the “dominant discourse” easily won over and launched the “dissident reading”, which was offered on the market by cultural materialists.

However, the interest of cultural materialists in Shakespeare and his age has some other reasons, apart from this criticism of modern “use” of the great Elizabethan.

Their perspective sheds a problematic light on the general claim that Shakespeare is a writer *for all time*, in the sense understood by “liberal humanists”, who attributed to his plays meanings transcending history, because they were supposed to be existential and universal. Even if there is a trace of such “eternal” meaning in these plays, then it results from the fact that their interpreters are always given the opportunity to align them repeatedly with their own picture of the world. This can be easily done since meanings are generally neither ambiguous, fixed, nor “given forever”. Actually, that is the reason why the interpreters of Shakespeare (in literary criticism or theatre), who seek to make these “open meanings” of his plays topical, do not have any problems with their view, shared also by Jan Kot, suggesting that Shakespeare is in fact “our contemporary”. And it would be misleading to believe that these “modernised interpretations” transfer the “authentic meanings” of his plays. In contrast to these interpreters, who have been trying to “modernise” Shakespeare at all cost, cultural materialists return him to his historical context and interpret him as a participant in its development. Therefore Sinfield, for example, mocks the interpretations of witches in *Macbeth* as allegorical figures of evil, or even mental projections of Macbeth’s ambition. At the time when a myth of witches was widely accepted and when witches were burned at the stake, the witches on theatre stages were no more than witches. To alter their original meaning would mean to ignore the cultural *difference* which draws a line between Shakespeare’s time and ours. However, the fact that his interpreters insist on presenting him as “our contemporary” simply proves that modern culture has embraced this procedure, which cultural materialists termed *appropriation*, or the usurpation of cultural values of the past as *our* own. (That is the “loot” which, according to Benjamin’s vivid description, the power-holders dragged behind in their triumphal marches!) Cultural materialists argue that to understand the past does

<sup>10</sup> See his books: *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, London, 1994, and *Cultural Politics: Queer Reading*, London, 1994.





not mean to appropriate it, but to acknowledge it as *other* and different, especially the *other* which is still able to communicate with us. (The desire to establish a real communication with the Other without appropriation is indeed one of the most progressive ideas of postmodernism.)

However, even if they interpret cultures of the past ages as “foreign countries”, which can only be reached by following the traces of preserved texts, this does not mean that cultural materialists fail to perceive history as a continuous process forming a bridge between the past and the present. In fact, they are particularly interested in Shakespeare’s age (denoted as the *early modern period* in England) since it was the period when capitalism and British colonialism started to develop and build the modern, civic conception of human personality and freedom upon these foundations. A considerable number of works on the Renaissance in England (for example, *The Subject of Tragedy* by Catherine Belsey) is dedicated to this transition from the pre-modern, feudal into the modern, concept of the *subject*, which establishes a different relation to the *object* of its mind (that is, to God, Logos, Truth, Essence, etc.). This period was marked by global changes in the sphere of ideas and human perception in general, especially in the sense employed by Foucault to describe these changes, and whose key term of *episteme* was borrowed by cultural materialists. And the drama of this transition from one *episteme* to another took a more prominent course on the Elizabethan stage than anywhere else, and this was the place where the *power relations* were presented in a very dramatic and entirely ambivalent way. As we already know, the Shakespearean scene has a very spectacular way of showing murders of monarchs, poisoning of kings and their legitimate heirs, crime and corruption at the court, desperate struggle for the throne, autocracy of the monarch, courtiers’ lack of morality, and madness of the rulers. With such open presentation of Power, on stage, in front of the capacity audiences, that theatre projected political events of the past into the present in a very impressive way and related them to contemporary affairs with obvious allusions. All that was happening in close vicinity of the centre of royal power: the *Globe* Theatre, as the venue of these scenes, was only half a mile away from the Tower of London, where the queen had her residence. This fact induced cultural materialists to inquire into the reason why the Elizabethan theatre could show crimes and murders at the royal court in such an overt manner in the vicinity of the central royal power. Their reply differs slightly from the one offered by the American new historicists who, following the suggestion of Michel Foucault, believe that Power allows – even provokes – the subversive discourse, in order to declare itself to be the *power*, and any subversive activity to be a *weakness*, by taking absolute control over it. In this respect cultural materialists, however, seem to be more optimistic: they perceive the Elizabethan theatre as the best evidence that the dominant discourse, the discourse of Power, can be confronted with the dissident discourse, which poses a latent, but at times serious threat to the functioning of the former discourse “Cultural materialism” has certainly set a new trend in the modern perception of literature and culture in general. Its radical ideas agitated traditionally peaceful atmosphere of the



British literary criticism, which is predominantly apolitical. Moreover, materialists did not want to promote their interpretations of literature as the only valid approach, which is often the case with other schools of literary criticism. They simply offered the alternative (Sinfield would use the term *dissident*) readings of the canon, which are in their opinion relevant for the present political moment. Their perception detached “literature” from the transcendent sphere of “artistic autonomy” and thus positioned it in the centre of historical life as one of the forces which in fact produce history. As a result, they induced many people to re-examine their deeply rooted notion of literature. However, they did not (nor did they try to) dispute the possibility of some different positions. A recently published, detailed study on Shakespeare’s language and puns<sup>11</sup>, which has been recently published, establishes beyond any doubt that none of this happened. Such studies clearly indicate that poetry has for ages been a site of many battles, apart from those mentioned by cultural materialists, including the poets’ battles with words, or, if somebody prefers, battles between words and their meanings. Of course, at this point cultural materialists might disagree and say, “literary texts include some other plays as well, not only puns”. And they would be right. But, with the situation such as it is, and will probably continue to be for a while, modern interpretations of literature will adopt diverse courses starting from the crossroads of postmodernism. Well, if cultural materialists interpret Shakespeare as a politically relevant cultural *icon*, thus seeking to free him from any appropriation by the dominant discourse and providing him with the opportunity to speak out in a dissident manner, then critics like Frank Kermode and many others will continue to interpret his works as *a miracle of language*, which produces what we call (but is it only in the traditional manner?) Poetry.

### JE LI SHAKESPEARE POLITIČKI PISAC? (IZAZOVI KULTURNOG MATERIJALIZMA)

Autor razmatra glavne ideje britanske škole književne kritike poznate pod nazivom *cultural materialism*, koja izučava historijske implikacije književnih tekstova u svjetlu novih i izazovnih kritičkih diskursa: marksizma, feminizma, strukturalizma, psihoanalize i post-strukturalizma i koja postavlja dalekosežna pitanja o statusu književnih tekstova ne samo kao jezičkih entiteta već i kao ideoloških snaga u britanskom društvu. Dovodeći u pitanje vjeru u “transcendentna”, bezvremena i univerzalna značenja, koja tradicionalni, liberalno-humanistički pristup pripisuje književnom tekstu, kulturni materijalizam nastoji protumačiti “tekst” kao mjesto gdje se očituju i iskušavaju konkretni historijski “odnosi snaga” (*power relations*). Kulturni materijalisti govore o “alternativnom” tumačenju kulturnih vrijednosti, o “disidentnom čitanju” djela koja su integrirana u diskurs Moći, o “političkim značenjima” poezije, pa čak i o “političkom Shakespeareu”, što je

<sup>11</sup> Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare’s Language*, Penguin, 2000.





naslov zbornika koji su uredili Alan Sinfield i Johnatan Dollimore, glavni proponenti “škole”. Kao i nove historiciste u SAD, njih posebno zanima način na koji “moć” (*Power*) uspostavlja i održava dominaciju u društvenom, političkom i kulturnom životu, kako dominantni diskurs ovladava subverzivnim i disidentnim diskursima, ali, isto tako, i kako ti diskursi, uprkos represiji, dolaze do izražaja i na taj način dovode u pitanje funkcioniranje Moći. Autor ističe da kulturne materijaliste posebno zanima način na koji je dominantni diskurs prisvojio Shakespearea. Opredjeljujući se za alternativno, *političko* čitanje i Shakespearea i suvremene “upotrebe” Shakespearea, oni su stvorili prostor na kojem se može oglasiti “disidentni diskurs”. Na taj način oni su se pridružili feminističkoj, postkolonijalnoj i neomarksističkoj kritici suvremene kulture.

