Shakespeare—“For all time”?

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The content of the curriculum tends to be the focus of contemporary debates on the humanities in college education, as if our only concern should be exactly which books are being taught on our campuses. Many people, for example, are understandably concerned about ensuring that Shakespeare remains in the college curriculum. But if the parents who clamor for the teaching of Shakespeare knew how his works are being taught these days, they might not be so eager to have their children study them. In fact, despite all the attacks from academic radicals on the so-called Great Books, Shakespeare courses continue to flourish on our campuses. For example, Harvard Magazine reports that “Shakespeare” was one of the most popular undergraduate courses at Harvard in the fall 1992 semester, second only to “Principles of Economics.” As encouraging as this fact may seem, we must be awake to the possibility that radical professors of literature have found more subtle ways of attacking our cultural heritage than outright canon-bashing. Having learned to treat traditional authors in untraditional
ways, they can still pursue their political agenda under the guise of teaching canonical works. The case of Shakespeare shows that the issue of the humanities in our colleges is more complicated than is often supposed, and that as several writers have begun to argue we must pay attention not just to what is being taught but also to how it is being taught.¹

I should, however, make clear from the beginning that I do not believe that the new approaches to Shakespeare on our college campuses are all bad. Above all, I do not share the common complaint that contemporary criticism has gone wrong by introducing politics into discussions of Shakespeare. Indeed, as someone who is himself interested in political approaches to Shakespeare, in many ways I feel more comfortable with contemporary Shakespeare criticism than I did with the situation when I was in graduate school. My Ph.D. dissertation was a political analysis of Shakespeare’s Roman plays, and when I wrote it in 1969-1970 it was greeted largely with bewilderment by my faculty advisors. Thus I would be the last to claim that nothing is to be learned from contemporary approaches to Shakespeare that stress the importance of politics in literature. Several of the most prominent Shakespeare critics today, such as Stephen Greenblatt, offer subtle and insightful commentary on his plays. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, current approaches to Shakespeare raise disturbing questions, especially about their one-sidedness and dogmatism. There is a difference between political approaches to literature and politicized approaches, that is, between those that rightly take into account the centrality of political concerns in many literary classics and those that willfully seek to reinterpret and virtually recreate classic works in light of contemporary political agendas. Unfortunately, in their effort to use Shakespeare to strike a blow for multiculturalism and other radical goals, today’s literature professors tend to be reductive and iconoclastic, presenting a diminished Shakespeare, one who is, I believe, much less interesting than he ought to be to our students. In particular, contemporary critics work to undermine the older

view that Shakespeare's plays are somehow of universal significance, a claim most eloquently embodied in a line from the eulogy by Ben Jonson preaced to the First Folio: "He was not of an age, but for all time!"

**New Historicism**

In a brief essay, I cannot hope to survey all developments in contemporary American Shakespeare criticism, and thus I will concentrate on the movement that has come to dominate the field at the moment, the so-called New Historicism (along with a closely allied movement in Great Britain, known as Cultural Materialism). To see the dominance of this movement, one need only look at which scholars have become the famous names in Shakespeare studies, at which books and articles are now routinely published in the field, and finally at how Shakespeare is taught throughout the country, at both research universities and liberal arts colleges. The term New Historicism was coined by Greenblatt and has been associated with him and a group of his colleagues at Berkeley, but the movement has by now spread throughout Shakespeare studies, Renaissance studies, and indeed literary studies in general. The New Historicism has a complicated intellectual genealogy, but its principal source is the French poststructuralist Michel Foucault; one might usefully describe the movement as a kind of deconstructed Marxism. Indeed the success of the New Historicism may in part be traced to the fact that it has become a kind of umbrella movement. Though broadly Marxist in its orientation, it has embraced the interpretive strategies of deconstruction, while at the same time pursuing the agenda of feminism and other forms of special-interest criticism. Deconstruction taught critics to look not only for what is expressed in a text but for what is hidden or suppressed as well. The New Historicism makes a political issue of such acts of suppression, always looking for the way minority positions have been silenced in literature. But to comprehend this approach fully, we must look more carefully at its intellectual heritage.

To understand the New Historicism, we must then begin from the fact that it is a species of historicism, a doctrine developed in the nineteenth century, largely as a result of the thinking of Hegel. Historicism is the view that all thought is historically determined—not just historically *conditioned*, as no rational per-
son would deny, but historically determined, a much more specific and hence questionable claim. For historicists, all human beings are creatures of their historical moment, bound by the horizons of their age. Anyone living in the Middle Ages must necessarily think in a distinctively medieval manner. In Marxist varieties of historicism, all thought is said to be determined specifically by economic forces. Marxists speak of feudal modes of thought, capitalist modes of thought, and so on. It is important to realize that the New Historicists are by no means the first to study Shakespeare in terms of economics and politics. There is, for example, a long tradition of Marxist interpretations of Shakespeare, going back at least to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s.

More generally, much of traditional Shakespeare scholarship has been, broadly speaking, historicist in orientation. E. M. W. Tillyard's famous notion of the Elizabethan World Picture, drilled into several generations of American undergraduates, is a good example. Many traditional scholars have insisted that to understand Shakespeare's works, we have to look at the ideas of his contemporaries, preferably the most common ideas and hence the ideas of the common people of his day, a goal which has sent armies of scholars off to pore over Elizabethan diaries, letters, sermons, graffiti, and other manifestations of popular consciousness. Thus we cannot single out the New Historicists for historicizing Shakespeare. Long before Stephen Greenblatt, we can observe reductive tendencies in Shakespeare scholarship. By their very nature, all forms of historicism work to assimilate Shakespeare back into what is viewed as his historical milieu.

I have always seen something paradoxically self-defeating in this approach. We turn to Shakespeare precisely because he seems to tower above his contemporaries. But then Shakespeare scholars come along and tell us that his ideas were no different from those of his contemporaries. He may have written somewhat better than they, but in his thought he was indistinguishable from the Elizabethan man in the street.

In my view, then, the old historicism was bad enough. But what is new about the New Historicism? The old historicism took a rather benign view of Shakespeare's being bound by the horizons of the Elizabethan Age. Traditional Shakespeare critics seemed to have a simple scholarly interest in how the ideas of
Shakespeare and his contemporaries differed from those of our day. With all the talk of bodily humours, music of the spheres, and vegetative souls, a quaint aura pervades the writings of the old historicists. The Elizabethans believed that monarchy is the best form of government; we believe that democracy is. For the old historicists that is just the way things are—different ages think in different ways. Traditional Shakespeare scholars did not appear to be pushing any kind of agenda and, in particular, they did not seem obsessed with asserting their superiority as people of the twentieth century over Shakespeare, the Elizabethan. If anything, one can detect a faint, and sometimes not-so-faint, nostalgia in the old historicism. These scholars often betray a longing for a time when the world view was simpler, an age of faith, less riddled by doubt than our modern times. In short, the old historicism tried to uncover the distinctively Elizabethan ideas in Shakespeare, but it did not subject them to an inquisition.

**Race, class, and gender**

The New Historicists inject a new passion into discussions of the historical limitations of Shakespeare's thought by examining them in the context of today's political issues. They are interested in the ways that Shakespeare's plays reflect the race, class, and gender prejudices of his day. In this way, the study of Shakespeare becomes a branch of the broader movement in the contemporary academy that is often referred to by its critics as "Oppression Studies." For the New Historicists, Shakespeare becomes a powerful symbol of all that is wrong with our culture. Here we begin to see both the similarities and the differences between the New Historicism and traditional Marxism. Like old-style Marxists, the New Historicists talk of exploitation and oppression. But they tend to focus on different modes of exploitation and oppression. Traditional Marxism centered on economic analysis, and viewed the exploitation of workers as the main defect of modern society. Orthodox Marxists claimed that capitalism impoverishes the working class, and that only socialism can improve its lot. The difficulty for Marxism is that its thesis did not appear to be borne out by economic facts. Over time capitalism appears to improve the living standards of workers; socialism, by contrast, has typically proved disastrous. In light of recent events in the communist world, these economic facts are
painfully evident to would-be Marxists now, but even earlier in the century, it began to become clear that Marx's predictions about capitalism just were not coming true. As a result, as early as the 1920s and 1930s, in thinkers such as Lukács, Gramsci, and Adorno, one can begin to observe a shift in Marxist analysis, away from a narrowly economic critique of capitalism to a broadly cultural one, in the hopes of finding a more solid basis for repudiating capitalism, or at least one less demonstrably refutable.

These developments were carried on by various forms of the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, and provide the basis for the New Historicism today. No longer feeling confident about economic arguments, the left has had to define new forms of exploitation. It is a curious fact that people who call themselves Marxists today rarely speak about the exploitation of workers, a phrase that once was the rallying cry of the left but now has a faintly archaic ring to it. Instead, today we hear constantly about the exploitation of minorities, women, and the environment. This shift in left-wing rhetoric is particularly evident among the New Historicists. They are loyal enough to Marxism to continue to invoke economic class as a category, but in general they have broadened the basis of their critique of capitalist existence, focusing on cultural issues, especially on the politics of group or ethnic identity. Cultural oppression is a much vaguer and less quantifiable concept than economic exploitation; hence the new forms of Marxism are less susceptible than the old to being judged by the standard of reality.

**Culture and power**

This change in approach has additional advantages for literary critics. In traditional Marxism, literature is viewed as part of the ideological superstructure of society, and hence as not all that important. Economics forms the base in classical Marxist analysis; culture is ultimately a mere epiphenomenon. In this view of the world, economists become all-important, and literary critics are of course marginal. In the New Historicism, would-be Marxist literary critics have found a way of moving themselves front-and-center in the enterprise of social criticism. They reject what they call the simplistic Marxist model of base and superstructure. Instead they view society as an all-embracing web or net-
work of power relations, in which domination can be exercised from any point, perhaps all the more effectively when not coming from a well-defined and obvious center of power, but rather radiating out of a cultural site from which no one would expect to be dominated, such as the theatre. Drawing upon the ideas of thinkers like Gramsci and Althusser—above all the concept of hegemony, the idea that culture is the locus of power in any regime—professors of English are now able to claim that analyzing literature can take us to the heart of political and economic problems. If Shakespeare can be shown to be part of the oppressive regime in the West, then a critical blow against his works takes on vastly increased importance and the literary critic can not only justify his role in society, but can even make a claim to centrality.

Thus we now see literary critics arguing that, like all products of the Elizabethan Age, Shakespeare's plays are racist and sexist, and they also reflect a set of socioeconomic prejudices, though critics vary as to which ones. Some see Shakespeare catering to his court patrons and thus embodying and appealing to aristocratic prejudices. Others see him in the grip of the nascent capitalist forces in the Renaissance and hence appealing to the prejudices of the new middle-class mercantile segment of his audience. In any case, defining the historically limited horizons of Shakespeare's thought ceases to be a purely antiquarian enterprise for the New Historicists and instead becomes part of a broader cultural critique. They view Shakespeare as a defining, perhaps even a founding figure of our culture; indeed they discover the seeds of modernity in the Renaissance. Thus criticizing Shakespeare becomes a way of radically criticizing our culture. This is the chief goal of many contemporary thinkers, who believe that Western culture is fundamentally flawed by its racism and sexism, as well as its commitment to capitalism and middle-class values. The New Historicists are able to find all these prejudices embodied in Shakespeare's plays. For them it is no accident that the central figure of our literary tradition reflects the central biases of our culture, perhaps even working to perpetuate them. To uncover the biases in Shakespeare thus becomes a way of uncovering the narrow-mindedness and exclusivity of Western culture, and thus in turn a way of pursuing the agenda of many members of the contemporary academy—pro-
moting multiculturalism and various forms of liberation, includ-
ing liberation from Western ideas, which are viewed as mere
prejudices. The New Historicism has carved out an intellectual
niche for itself by elaborate theoretical disagreements with ear-
lier forms of historicism and Marxism, but its success in the
academy has been largely due to something much more basic: its
ability to tap into the driving forces of current political move-
ments on our campuses—above all, the obsession with identity
politics.

The Tempest in the academy

As a concrete example of the New Historicism, I offer the
treatment of The Tempest today. It is indeed a sign of the times
that this play has risen to such prominence in contemporary
Shakespeare studies. Long languishing in relative neglect in the
academy, The Tempest has recently become one of the most
commonly taught of Shakespeare’s plays, especially in general
survey courses. A professor teaching only one Shakespeare play
nowadays is as likely to choose The Tempest as Hamlet or King
Lear. I have no objection to this development; in fact I regard
The Tempest as one of Shakespeare’s greatest works, perhaps
even the highest or at least the most mature fruit of his wisdom.
Moreover, I believe that The Tempest needs to be analyzed in
political terms. In my view, the play grows out of Plato’s Repub-
lic and constitutes a profound meditation on the issue of the
philosopher-king, raising the fundamental question of classical
political thought, namely the rule of the wise.2 But this is not
how the New Historicists approach The Tempest. They do not
see the play as raising basic questions but rather as reflecting
basic prejudices. They claim, for example, that the play is cap-
tive to Elizabethan sexual ideology and, more generally, to the
so-called patriarchal myths that infect all of Western culture. In
its celebration of female chastity and wedded love, the play is
said to support the bourgeois institution of the family and the
limitations it places on women, stereotyping them as inferior to

2I have developed my view of The Tempest in two essays: “Shakespeare’s The
Tempest: The Wise Man as Hero,” Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring,
1980), pp. 64-75, and “Prospero’s Republic: The Politics of Shakespeare’s The
Tempest,” in Shakespeare as Political Thinker, eds. John Alvis and Thomas G. West
men. The play is also said to reflect class prejudices in its picture of lower-class figures like Stephano and Trinculo. By portraying the stupidity and futility of their attempted rebellion against their aristocratic betters, the play is said to support the Elizabethan status quo. As Paul Brown writes (in an essay in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's *Political Shakespeare: New essays in cultural materialism*), in the kind of turgid prose that unfortunately has become characteristic of today's Shakespeare criticism:

This division of masterless behaviour serves a complex hegemonic function: the unselfmastered aristocrats are reabsorbed, after correction, into the governing class, their new solidarity underscored by their collective laughter at the chastened revolting plebeians. The class joke acts as a recuperative and defusive strategy which celebrates the renewal of courtly hegemony and displaces its breakdown on to the ludicrous revolt of the masterless.

Today's critics find sexism and classism in all of Shakespeare's plays; what draws their attention to *The Tempest* in particular is the racism they find in the play and above all the fact that it can be viewed as complicit in the evils of European colonialism. The distinctive thrust of the recent critical fascination with *The Tempest* is to be found in the New Historicists' obsession with Caliban, the deformed, nearly subhuman creature Prospero finds on the island to which he is exiled. By now Caliban has virtually been turned into the hero of the play, a kind of standard bearer for Oppression Studies everywhere. In particular, in the New Historicism Caliban is taken as a prototype of the oppressed colonial. One of the most frequent and bitter charges these days against Western civilization is that it is imperialistic, and Prospero is now being analyzed as the archetype of the Western conquistador. He has taken the island away from its supposedly rightful native ruler, Caliban, and enslaved him in the process, forcing him to do the daily chores around the Prospero household. To contemporary critics all the fundamental injustices of imperialism are thus evident in *The Tempest*. Once again, I want to point out that, unlike many of my more traditional colleagues, I have no objection to reading Shakespeare in light of the issue of imperialism. In fact, I did just that back in 1976 in my book, *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire*, in which I analyze Shakespeare's portrayal of how an imperialistic policy eventually
undermines a political community. But I present Shakespeare as a conscious critic of imperialism, one who was acutely aware of its negative aspects. What I object to in the New Historicist interpretations of *The Tempest* is their general unwillingness to acknowledge that Shakespeare himself may have had some genuine insights into what is, after all, the extremely complex issue of imperialism, an issue not reducible to simple anti-Western slogans. (To their credit, some New Historicists acknowledge that *The Tempest* may reflect Shakespeare’s own doubts about colonialism.)

In particular, today’s critics tend to ignore the ways in which Shakespeare actively makes the case for Prospero’s rule over Caliban as the rule of the wise man over the fool. To be sure, the New Historicists would refuse to accept this formulation of the problem because they would see it as a way of begging the question. One of their principal charges is that it is precisely Shakespeare’s portrait of Prospero and Caliban that is at fault, for it is itself taken as reflecting his prejudices, and that means his racial biases, the biases of the European against the non-European. They charge that the whole problem in *The Tempest* is that the European is taken as the standard of civilization and the non-European is viewed as barbaric. Thus these critics see Caliban as an important literary archetype, a prefiguration of the way the American Indian was to be portrayed in our literature or the African in much European imperialist fiction. Correspondingly, Thomas Cartelli (in an essay in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O’Connor’s *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*) sees Prospero as a prototype for one of the most sinister figures in the literature of imperialism, the central character in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, as well as for some of the most famous figures in the actual history of imperialism:

What Prospero contributes to the possibilities of a Kurtz (... or a Rhodes or Stanley, for that matter) is a culturally privileged rationale for objectifying what are really always subjective representations of the Other, for presenting as facts what are really only fictions.... *The Tempest* supplies a pedigreed precedent for a politics of imperial domination premised on the objectified intractability of the native element. It provides a pretext for a paternalistic approach to colonial administration that sanctions a variety of enlightened procedures, ranging from the soft word to the closed fist.
Here Cartelli invokes one of the most influential notions in contemporary criticism, Edward Said’s concept of orientalism, the idea that the West is constantly involved in artificially defining itself against the East, or any imaginary Other. The European is said to feed his sense of superiority by contrasting himself with some fictional, debased form of humanity in the person of the non-European. This is the deepest way in which *The Tempest* may be seen as complicit in the European imperialist enterprise. As Francis Barker and Peter Hulme put it (in an essay in John Drakakis’ *Alternative Shakespeare*), in prose that seems to have been written, not just by two men, but by a whole committee:

Through its very occlusion of Caliban’s version of proper beginnings, Prospero’s disavowal is itself performative of the discourse of colonialism, since this particular reticulation of denial of dispossession with retrospective justification for it, is the characteristic trope by which European colonial regimes articulated their authority over land to which they could have no conceivable legitimate claim.

**Shakespeare as ideologue**

I wish I had the space to give a fuller account of New Historicist approaches to *The Tempest*, as well as to offer a detailed refutation of them. Here I can only use *The Tempest* as an example of how Shakespeare is now routinely treated in the academy. And I want to repeat that I see much of interest in this approach. What I am troubled by is the fact that critics are now using Shakespeare to pursue a relentlessly anti-Western agenda, as if the mere presence of a genius like Shakespeare in the Western tradition were not in itself at least a minor point in its favor. But of course the effect of contemporary treatments of Shakespeare is to reduce his stature in the eyes of students (while conveniently raising the stature of the contemporary Shakespeare critic). Safely entrenched in their politically correct attitudes, students are made to feel superior to Shakespeare, to look down patronizingly at his supposedly limited and biased view of the world. This development would not be so disturbing if it were merely a matter of one author’s reputation, but I view it as a sad case of a lost opportunity. Instead of being obsessed with Shakespeare’s prejudices (which no doubt are in some ways
evident in his plays), students could find the reading of Shakespeare a way to break out of their own prejudices, which common sense suggests are at least equally ingrained. Shakespeare could be providing an opportunity for students to be confronted with a genuinely distinct understanding of the world, one that challenges the easy assumptions of today about what is just and unjust. When read properly, for example, *The Tempest* forces us to ask the question Socrates posed so powerfully (and so subversively): Why do those who truly know how to rule correctly not have, by nature, the right to rule over the unwise? This view is foreign to us in the twentieth century, with our democratic prejudices, but perhaps that is precisely why Shakespeare can be valuable to us, as a representative of older, aristocratic modes of thought at their best.

Contemporary critics treat *The Tempest* as an example of ideology, claiming that Shakespeare tries to present as the order of nature what were in fact merely the conventional opinions of his day. Thus Terry Eagleton in his *William Shakespeare* argues that the ending of *The Tempest* involves a deliberate act of mystification:

> What it fails to draw attention to is the glaring contradiction on which its whole discourse effectively founders: the fact that this 'organic' restoration of a traditional social order founded upon Nature and the body rests not only on a flagrant mystification of Nature, gratuitous magical device and oppressive patriarchalism, but is actually set in the context of the very colonialism which signals the imminent victory of the exploitative, 'inorganic' mercantile bourgeoisie. Unable to tidy up this minor discrepancy, Shakespeare returns to the natural environment of Warwickshire with a considerable amount of money. In this, at least, he had the best of both worlds.

Here we see the sheer vulgarity of contemporary approaches to Shakespeare, the snide and supercilious attempt to reduce his achievement in our eyes by imputing the basest of material motives to his artistic career. But when viewed without these Marxist prejudices in mind, *The Tempest* in fact demonstrates Shakespeare's profound awareness of the distinction between the natural and the conventional, and his attempt to discriminate the two elements in human life, especially in the political sphere. In the opening scene of the play, we see a ship threatened with
destruction in the midst of a storm at sea. Shakespeare shows two groups of characters: the aristocratic rulers of Italy, who are frightened out of their wits and hence incapable of dealing with the crisis, contrasted with the workmanlike mariners, who, given their knowledge of the sea, are doing their best to save themselves and their socially superior passengers. When one of the aristocrats tries to assert his conventional authority over the mariners, one of them silences him with the observation: “What cares these roarers for the name of king?” Far from being a dupe of the aristocracy, Shakespeare is perfectly capable of documenting its limitations, even in comparison to mere working men. As Shakespeare had shown so profoundly in *King Lear*, he was acutely aware of the fact that the order of nature does not always lend its support to the conventional order of political authority. In its clear sense that the ordinary laborers of the sea—provided that they have the correct knowledge of the mariner’s art—have more to say in a real crisis than their supposed betters in the aristocracy, the opening scene of *The Tempest* flies in the face of all the New Historicist assumptions about Shakespeare’s prejudices and limited horizons. Shakespeare makes fun of Stephano and Trinculo, not because they are lower class by social convention, but because they are stupid by nature. As a whole, *The Tempest* shows that the natural distinction between the wise and the foolish cuts across the conventional distinction between the high and the low in social status. On the issue of nature versus convention, Shakespeare had more in common with Socrates and Plato than he did with the average Elizabethan.

**The future of Shakespeare studies**

I have tried to give some sense of what is going on in the academic treatment of Shakespeare today, but I have inevitably oversimplified the work of the New Historicists, who are often sophisticated thinkers, presenting their arguments in complex ways. For example, I have stressed the way the New Historicists portray Shakespeare as simply embodying the prejudices of his day. But many of the New Historicists depart from traditional Marxism on just this point, refusing to accept a mechanical correlation between class origins and class consciousness. Some New Historicists are willing to acknowledge a subversive strain in
Shakespeare, usually because they see him reproducing the reality of his age so accurately that he unconsciously portrays its ideological fissures or contradictions, thus enabling contemporary critics to articulate them from their superior vantage point in the twentieth century. The position of the New Historicists on the issue of orthodoxy and subversion in Shakespeare can thus become very complicated. But suffice it to say here that, given the origin of their views in the thought of Foucault, who believed that any attack on a system must ultimately be construed as a move within that system, in the end the New Historicists believe that even if Shakespeare's plays may be said to raise doubts about conventional Elizabethan dogmas, they actually served the purposes of the ruling authorities, who in effect used the theatre to let their subjects blow off ideological steam and in the process become more docile. This position is very convenient for the New Historicists because it makes it possible to reinterpret any attempt to show unconventional elements in Shakespeare's thinking as just more evidence for his deeper role in maintaining Elizabethan orthodoxy.

This is one reason why the New Historicism has become difficult to challenge in the academy today and why it is now fast assuming the position of an intellectual orthodoxy itself. If I seem to be portraying a bleak situation in my account of Shakespeare in our universities, that is my intention. I believe that our teachers—and hence our students—are in danger of losing sight of what truly makes Shakespeare unique and our most valuable cultural asset: his ability to test the ideals of his day against the ideals of other eras, an effort which underlies the extraordinary geographical and historical range of subject matter in his plays and which provides us with an opportunity to test our own ideals against the ones he portrays so powerfully. For all its theoretical sophistication and occasional local insights, the New Historicism is working to obfuscate our larger view of Shakespeare and narrow our appreciation of the scope of his achievement. In criticizing this movement, I want to stress that I am not speaking as a representative of the traditional mainstream of Shakespeare criticism. If anything, I have tried to suggest the continuity of the New Historicism with the old, to show how traditional scholars made the same error of assimilating Shakespeare to his contemporaries. In short, I object to the
New Historicism not because it is new but because it is historicism.

Similarly I am not one of those who yearns to go back to the good old days of the so-called New Critical interpretations of Shakespeare, when all the emphasis was on formal questions, patterns of imagery and symbolism, and no one dared to speak of the political dimension of Shakespeare's plays. If the New Historicism has accomplished anything, it has done so by calling attention to the centrality of political questions in the proper interpretation of his plays. What is wrong with the New Historicism is that it pursues its political analysis of Shakespeare within the context of a narrow political agenda, largely determined by specific contemporary concerns. What we need to do is to combine the older sense of Shakespeare's universality with the new interest in the political dimension of his plays. For ultimately it is in the wide range of his political vision that Shakespeare's universal importance is to be found, and hence his relevance to our contemporary situation. But we should not be using our supposed contemporary wisdom to question Shakespeare; rather we should interrogate our own idols in light of the wisdom embodied in his plays.