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## POLITICAL ASPECTS OF SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORY PLAYS: MODERNIST AND POSTMODERNIST READINGS IN A 'CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATIONS'

### Abstract

This paper analyzes different approaches to the political contents of Shakespeare's history plays in the modernist and the postmodernist theoretical framework. While the modernist critics were undoubtedly aware of the complex political strategies transposed in drama, they mostly tended to analyze the presupposed dominant features of the Elizabethan 'discursive formation'. Postmodernist approaches to the history plays, within a wide theoretical scope which includes deconstruction, new historicism, cultural materialism, feminist criticism, Bakhtinian criticism and psychoanalysis, express a more skeptical attitude in interpreting political contents and emphasize different instances of implied marginal and subversive meanings in the history plays. It is argued that the hermeneutical concept of the 'conflict of interpretations' developed by Paul Ricoeur in *De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud* (1965) has its special instance in the understanding of the political aspects of Shakespeare's history plays in the twentieth century.

A special attention is paid to the most recent postmodernist approach, which has been emerging under the name of *presentism*. It tends to relate the political contents of the plays to the political context of their twenty-first century critics/readers/spectators.

**Key words:** Shakespeare, history plays, modernist approaches, postmodernist approaches, conflict of interpretations, presentism

The criticism dealing with Shakespeare's history plays in the twentieth century represents a special instance of the hermeneutic phenomenon which Paul Ricoeur, French philosopher of phenomenological and hermeneutic orientation, designated as the "conflict of interpretations". Introduced in 1965, in his book *Freud and Philosophy: an Essay on Interpretation*, this concept implies that a profound change in the process of understanding has taken place in all fields of humanities after Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. Having shown the basic premises of both Aristotelian and biblical tradition of understanding meaning and exegesis of texts, Paul Ricoeur approaches what he considers as the key difficulty which governs the fate of modern hermeneutics. "There is", says Ricoeur, "no general hermeneutics, no universal canon of exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation. The hermeneutic field...is internally at variance with itself. ...According to the one pole, hermeneutics is understood as the manifestation and restoration of a meaning addressed to me in the manner of a message, a proclamation, or as is sometimes said, a kerygma; according to the other pole, it is understood as a demystification, as a reduction of illusion. (Ricoeur 1970: 26-27)". A bit further, he says "From the beginning we must consider this double possibility: this tension, this extreme polarity is the truest expression of our 'modernity'. (Ibid.)" Hermeneutics, therefore, according to Ricoeur, is seen as animated by double motivation, willingness to listen, on the one hand, willingness to suspect, on the other, the former proceeding out of certain obedience, the latter out of certain epistemological rigour (Ibid.).

How does this apply to the criticism dealing with Shakespeare's history plays and their political contents? Ricoeur's analysis is highly general and it concerns the basic hermeneutic attitudes in approaching any symbolically mediated meaning. The 'obedient' (in Ricoeur's words) approach is characteristic of the phenomenology of religion. It is a hermeneutics of faith, not the first faith of a simple soul, but a faith which has undergone criticism, a post-critical faith, the one which seeks to understand through interpretation, which is animated by the maxim "Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe", thus forming a hermeneutic circle of believing and understanding (Ibid. 28). The suspicious approach, on the other hand, is dominated by the three seemingly mutually exclusive masters, says Ricoeur – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. "What all three attempted, in different ways, was to make their "conscious" methods of deciphering coincide with the "unconscious" work

of ciphering which they attributed to the will of power, to social being, to the unconscious psychism. *Guile will be met by double guile* (Ibid. 34)". Narrowing the focus towards the interpretations of Shakespeare's history plays in the twentieth century, we could, *mutatis mutandis*, uphold that the readings representative of the first half of the century, the modernist historicism of E. M. W. Tillyard and Lily Campbell, as well as the readings of G. Wilson Knight and John Dover Wilson – with their confidence in the stable semantics of language, in historiography as a reliable kind of historical knowledge, in a pervasively dominant culture of an epoch as the context of the literary texts and drama, in the divine, monarchical and authorial authorities – could be seen as close to the pole of the hermeneutics of faith, as carrying out the hermeneutic circle "Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe." Believe in God, in cosmic and social hierarchical order symbolically embodied or realized in monarchy, believe in the possibility of transferring the historical truth via historiography, believe in Shakespeare as a transcendental creator, and as a poetic spokesman for the 'Elizabethan world picture' and the 'Tudor myth', as shown in Tillyard's influential books. The postmodernist critics are, on the other hand, the ones who are meeting guile by double guile: the guiles of Elizabethan culture and politics as expressions of the will to power, and Will's linguistic guiles as ambiguous expressions of and subtle subversive challenges to that same culture and politics are met by the guiles of theory descending from Nietzsche via Foucault and Derrida, from Marx via Althusser, Macherey, Raymond Williams or Frederic Jameson, and from Freud via Lacan.

Thus, on the opposed poles of the critical reception of Shakespeare's history plays, we find Henry V as an ideal king on whom the divine grace is bestowed (Tillyard 1944; Campbell 1947; Knight 1944; Wilson 1943) and Henry V as a crafty real-politician, Machiavellian: Stephen Greenblatt says that "we are continually reminded that Hal is a 'juggler', a conniving hypocrite", and that we are, at the same time, "drawn to the celebration of both the prince and the power" (Greenblatt 1988:30); Dollimore and Sinfield bring into focus his imperial ambition paid by human lives (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985: 226); John Sutherland uses the expression 'war criminal' (Sutherland 2000); and the presentist reading by Ewan Fernie scrutinizes the presence of the play in different times, including our own, and the use of its potential to inspire and encourage extreme action in the media supporting the current war against terrorism.

Shakespeare's English history plays are permeated with political communication, and the first group of critics tended to relate the politics to larger principles. Emphasizing the bond between God and the English monarchy, Tillyard, Knight and Wilson insisted on the morality-play-like patterns in Edward Hall's historiography and in Shakespeare's plays and tetralogies, on the providential significance of crimes, conflicts and suffering, while Lily Campbell saw parallels with the medieval moralist genre of *speculum*, which also implied the Christian frame of macrocosmic hierarchy. Tillyard excluded Machiavelli's political views as irrelevant for the history plays. Lily Campbell investigated the relations between the eternal sameness of God's justice, or the eternal sameness of men, according to Machiavelli, and the historical cycles (Campbell 1977:121), while arguing that Shakespeare's histories served a purpose in elucidating political problems of Elizabeth's day: Catholicism, usurpation, rebellion, etc. Their belief in a stable text transferring a stable meaning about the ethically reliable cosmic order, apart from being characteristic of the general European epistemological model (Aristotelian, Christian and Cartesian, all forming the basis for Ricoeur's hermeneutics of faith), was caused by their particular historical hermeneutic situation: Tillyard, Knight and Wilson were writing at the time when anti-fascism, patriotism and defensive warfare determined their readings. This especially applies to Knight, whose texts published as *The Olive and the Sword* were actually written for public lectures and radio broadcasts in 1941, and the history plays were seen as 'fuel for the national self-confidence'.

Only the most paradigmatic texts are taken into account in this article. The best known new critical reading of the *1 & 2 Henry IV* by Brooks and Heilman (1945), analyzed in detail by Hugh Grady in *The Modernist Shakespeare*, cannot be subsumed under this kind of hermeneutics, although it is not quite the hermeneutics of suspicion yet. Sigurd Burckhardt, Wilbur Sanders and Roy Battenhouse, as also shown by Hugh Grady, unsettled the notions of stable structure, meaning, and political semantics in history plays and their criticism comes close to the postmodernist readings of Shakespeare (Grady 2001: 185-187), that is, close to the hermeneutics of suspicion.

The deconstruction, Marxism, new historicism, with its Foucault's legacy, cultural materialism, feminist criticism, Bakhtinian criticism and psychoanalysis introduced the guile, the ruse, the cunning of the hermeneutics of suspicion into the critical response to Shakespeare's

history plays. Both political communication in the plays themselves and the political strategies that could be read out of the plays, appeared as more complex. The internal political contradictions of the medieval English history and of the Elizabethan culture became more visible, the layers of the political significance more numerous, more subtly perceived. Hence, Terry Eagleton (1986), Robert C. Knapp (1989), and many other authors investigated language, and the fact that the being of King has nothing substantial about it, that king is a sign, a complex of symbolic meanings, a signifier within a symbolic system which makes it significant. At the same time, this approach has shown the effects of the symbolic power of language in the material reality, the rhetorical and mythological, artificial and histrionic qualities of the politics. That is one way of demystifying the divine bond and the divine precedence of the power of English kings in Shakespeare's plays.

Stephen Greenblatt, on the other hand, has shown that Shakespeare's history plays are concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder. In the famous text "Invisible bullets", he investigates the recording, testing and explaining of the latent Machiavellian anthropology in Thomas Herriot's colonial report (Greenblatt 1988: 18-47)<sup>1</sup> and their theatrical equivalents in *1 & 2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*. These plays record the voices "that seem to dwell in realms apart from that ruled by the potentates of the land", says Greenblatt (1988: 30). He also shows theatricality as one of power's modes. The subversive voices are, according to Greenblatt, registered, but they do not undermine that order. The dominant values are, paradoxically, secured by the generation of their subversive contraries. Thus the monarchical power in England and its postulates were being 'tested' by the dramatized disturbing hypotheses (the tavern, the battleground and the village scenes). The same can be said of a number of scenes in *Henry V*, first of all the explanations given by the Archbishop of Canterbury (*Henry V*, I, ii, 33-95; 97-114). Greenblatt shows the double ruse of the text which doesn't make the play bitterly ironic. The potentially subversive doubts are deferred, and, paradoxically intensify the power of the king. Stephen Orgel (1975) and Leonard Tennenhouse (1988) showed that the political imperatives in the English Renaissance were the same as aesthetic imperatives, and that drama idealized and demystified the forms of power by the forms of plays, strategies of political

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Harriot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588).

communication coincided with the strategies of representation. The fact that both theatre and the play of authority depend on spectators is another point of the postmodernist readings, new historicist and psychoanalytical. In the text entitled “Mock Sovereignty: *Henry V*”, Christopher Pye (1990) argued that the fundamentally political character of the play *Henry V* lies in the bafflement it produces in the recipients before the play, just as the subjects were supposed to have felt before the monarch’s presence. The multiplications of king’s roles, including the ones that produce mock-images, mark the mystification of political sovereignty. The spectacular, ambiguous figure of the theatrical king, just as the presence of a real sovereign, constitutes political subjects drawn towards the penetrating and impenetrable power (Pye 1990: 44), “the sovereign spectacle subjects the viewer to its own phantasmal gaze (Ibid. 76)”.

While under the same large hermeneutic umbrella of the hermeneutics of suspicion, Dollimore and Sinfield articulate a different emphasis in their understanding of the political communication within the fictive world of the play *Henry V*, and on the level of the play as a literary artifact and as a social event. The subversion is not all so safely contained. “The construction of ideology is complex – even as it consolidates, it betrays inherent instability (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985: 211)”. This applies to the ideological aspect of the play *Henry V* – it reveals both the strategies of power and the anxieties produced by that same power.

The range of interpretation within the postmodernist paradigm is large. Phyllis Rackin, in *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles*, articulated a particularly astute perception of the hermeneutic complexity in the case of the history plays. Aware of the historical and ideological embeddedness of the historian, of the playwright and of the critic, she historicized Shakespeare’s histories and her own readings. That is a permanent spiral of the hermeneutics of suspicion: a consciousness aware of the other’s consciousness’ unreliability, and of one’s own in approaching it. Feminist (especially Rackin and Howard: 1997) and Bakhtinian readings, especially by Graham Holderness (1992), are vivid examples of the same distrustful approach to the traditional, and even to the new historicist understanding of the political contents of the plays.

Graham Holderness has approached the history plays from the perspective of the complex plurality of renaissance historiography, regarding the plays themselves as alternative historiography, interventions in historiography. Political communication is shown to contain quasi-

theories of historicized fiction and fictionalized history as, for example, in *Richard III*, in the verse spoken by Scrivener (*RIII*, III, vi, 1-14), or in the clever rejoinders concerning legend and written history exchanged between Gloucester and the young prince Edward (*RIII*, III, i, 63-94) (Holderness 2000). He also seems to integrate different hermeneutic traditions, and to avoid choosing, irrevocably, between the separate directions in the criticism concerning the linear temporal framework of the 'grand narratives' and discontinuous, fragmentary series of 'little narratives'.

The modernist critics were eager to get the message from Shakespeare, concerning monarchy, patriotism, political and social order. They directed themselves towards the text with confidence, in order to restore its meaning, in the manner of a faithful reader of the Bible who seeks *the* Message and the confirmation of his/her fate, eager to make it rational, in a way, to transform it into a result of understanding. The postmodernist critics approached the history plays boldly and suspiciously, aiming to find out the strategies inaccessible without the ruses of Nietzsche's, Derrida's, Foucault's, Marxist and psychoanalytical legacy. At the same time, both modernist and postmodernist interpretations are also consequences of the respective critics' *hermeneutic situation*, to use Hans-Georg Gadamer's term, of their situatedness in their own time, philosophical and political conceptions that have formed them, political reality, gender, intellectual background. For Tillyard, Knight and Wilson, history plays were a polygon for thinking about England endangered in the Second World War. For the postmodern critics faced with the subtle guiles of political manipulation in the presumably transparent societies practicing similar ways of the containment of subversion, including its intellectual, academic modes, the strategies of political communication appear as hermeneutic provocation, not only because their doubt is directed towards the Cartesian notion of consciousness, but because they are existentially drawn to pose these questions to Shakespeare's texts.

This brings us to the orbit of presentism, which conceptually coincides with some crucial points of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. Such position implies the importance of the critic's situatedness in her/his time, historical, social and personal experience, intellectual formation, religion, gender, race...etc. One's *hermeneutic situation* and one's *receptive horizon*, in Gadamer's terminology, imply a very similar understanding of any textually mediated meaning, *mutatis mutandis*. Interpretation, according to Gadamer, thematizes "the totality of our relationship to the world that finds its expression in language (Gadamer, 1977: 83)". Presentism

in Shakespearean studies, as an interpretative position aware of its own circumstances which contribute to the formation of a meaning, is close to the presuppositions of a hermeneutics which, says Gadamer, “achieves its actual productivity only when it reflects simultaneously on its own critical endeavours, that is, on its own limitations and the relativity of its own position (Ibid: 93)”. Modernist historicism does not show this metacritical consciousness. Some of the postmodernist readings are self-reflective in this sense, some, being strictly historicist, are not interested, whereas, presentism seems to be based on this kind of meta-critical reflection. By interpreting the text within one’s own horizon and one’s own concepts, while being self-reflectively aware of the horizon and the concepts, one gives the text a new validity. For Gadamer, the work of art confronts us itself, and to understand what it says *to us* is a self-encounter. It involves the task of integrating it into one’s own self-understanding. Gadamer, as is well known, was, in a less hermetic way articulating Heidegger’s position that interpreting is always understanding of what is *Being*, of what is *to be there*, *Dasein*, even, one could add, via history plays from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Ewan Ferny, in the text “Action! Henry V”, compares a play of Shakespeare to another person, overwhelmingly present, intellectually engaging and mysterious. Presence is perceived not as knowledge but as a powerful imminence of sense – “ineffably beyond thought, which it nonetheless irresistibly solicits (Fernie 2007: 96-97).”

The conflicted Anglophone interpretations of Shakespeare’s history plays represent major responses to these texts in the twentieth century. Although unavoidably impoverished in translations, Shakespeare’s history plays attract presentist readings in very different contexts. During the wars of the nineties in ex-Yugoslavia, the scenes of Falstaff’s recruiting of the soldiers, his corruption, his expressions of both amoral military cynicism, on the one hand, and disillusioned pacifism, on the other, were recognized as provocative in class, and stimulated most vivid discussions among the undergraduates I was teaching at the time. Richard Gloucester’s strategy of modeling the reality to his own needs – demystified by the scrivener who says that he spent eleven hours to write over the indictment of the good Lord Hastings, and then, that

The precedent was full as long a-doing,  
And yet within these five hours Hastings liv’d  
Untainted, unexamin’d, free, at liberty... (*Richard III*, III, vi, 7-9)

– was also recognized in the Balkans in the nineties as urgently provocative for the very present we were living. Just as the current global experience tells us how provocative and discussion-seeking are the words of Rumour at the beginning of the 2 *Henry IV*, who says that

...the big year, swoln with some other grief,  
Is thought with child by the stern tyrant War” (2 *Henry IV*,  
Induction, 13-14)

This prologue offers a proto-theory of mass-media in a poetic nutshell, defining himself – Rumour, or herself – Virgilian Fama, after whose figure Shakespeare’s Rumour is fashioned, as the one who unfolds

The acts commenced on this ball of earth.  
Upon my tongues continual slanders ride,  
The which in every language I pronounce,  
Stuffing the ears of men with false reports.  
I speak of peace, while covert enmity  
Under the smile of safety wounds the world; (5-10).  
Or further:  
...Rumour is a pipe  
Blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures,  
And of so easy and so plain a stop  
That the blunt monster with uncounted heads,  
The still-discordant wav’ring multitude,  
Can play upon it. (15-20).

Thus, after this brief reconsideration of the different approaches to the political contents of Shakespeare’s history plays, it can be said that the hermeneutic map of the twentieth century interpretations of these plays includes a modernist continent of the ‘hermeneutics of faith,’ a postmodernist one of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ and a new found land of a hermeneutics similar to Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s notions of interpretation, discovered recently by presentism.

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ПОЛИТИЧКИ АСПЕКТИ ШЕКСПИРОВИХ ИСТОРИЈСКИХ ДРАМА:  
МОДЕРНИСТИЧКА И ПОСТМОДЕРНИСТИЧКА ЧИТАЊА  
У ‘СУКОБУ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЈА’

У овом раду се испитују модернистички и постмодернистички приступи политичким аспектима Шекспирових историјских драма. Политичке теме су из модернистичке перспективе анализирани у складу са претпостављеним доминантним одликама елизабетанске ‘дискурзивне формације’. Постмодернистичка читања – у светлу деконструкције, новог историзма, културног материјализма, феминистичког, бахтиновског или психоаналитичког приступа – показују већу меру скепсе у разумевању ових тема. Испитују се и маргинална и субверзивна значења. У раду се показује да херменеутички концепт ‘сукоба интерпретација’, развијен у студији француског филозофа херменеутичке и феноменолошке традиције Пола Рикера (Paul Ricoeur), развијен у студији *О интерпретацији, оглед о Фројду (De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud, 1965)*, може бити примењен на супротстављена тумачења Шекспирових историјских драма у двадесетом веку. Приказан је и концепт *prezentizam*, који се последњих година појављује као нова могућност приступа Шекспировом стваралаштву. Након дуготрајне доминације новог историзма и стављања акцента на условљеност смисла текста културом у оквиру које је настао, *prezentizam* представља усмеравање критичке пажње на рецепцију Шекспира у савремености 21. века.

**Кључне речи:** Шекспир, историјске драме, модернистички приступи, постмодернистички приступи, сукоб интерпретација, *prezentizam*