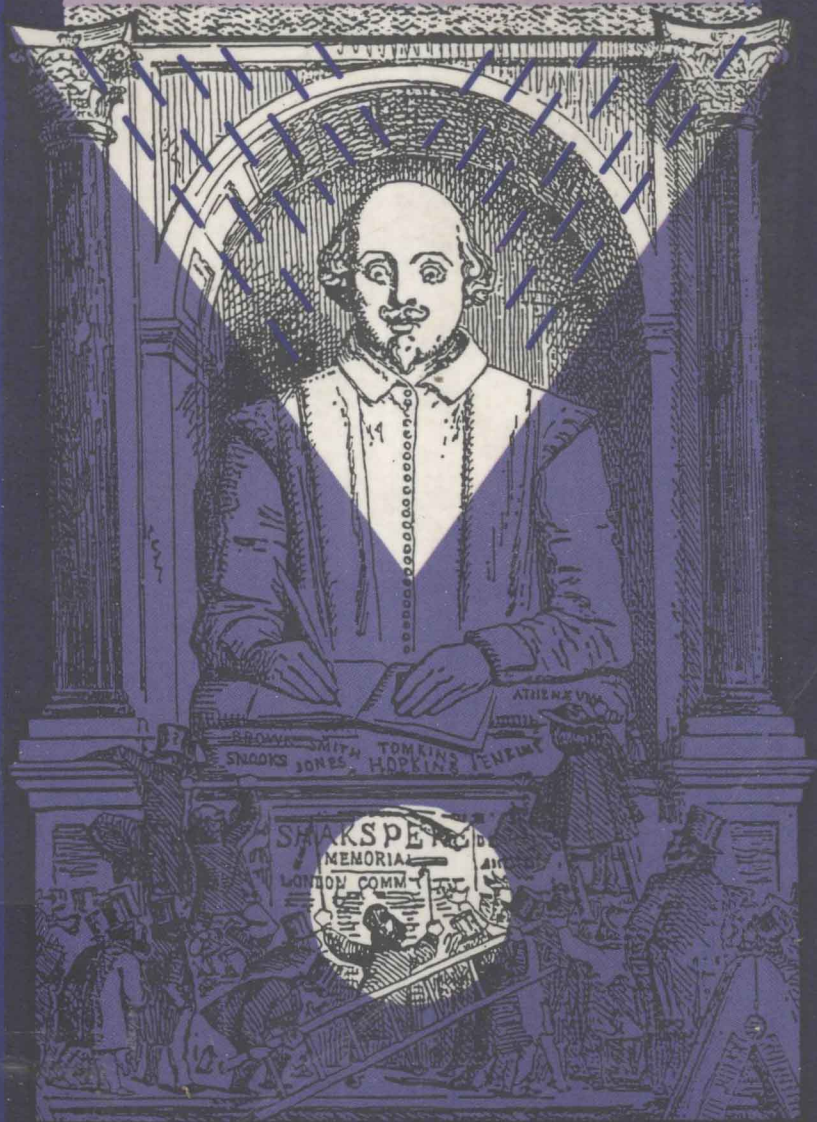


# Shakespeare Left and Right

EDITED BY IVO KAMPS



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. . . for the eye sees not itself  
But by reflection, by some other things.  
—*Julius Caesar*

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## Introduction: Ideology and its Discontents

Ivo Kamps

As the rhythmic words subside/ My Common Ground invites you in/ or do  
you prefer to wait outside/ Or is it true/ The Common Ground for me is  
without you . . . Oh is it true/ There's no Ground Common enough for me  
and you.

Are recent methods of literary scholarship causing literature and art in general to be displaced by politics? The question implies a fundamental opposition between them—an opposition which is real and permanent to many traditionalists but which is deeply ideological to many feminist, Marxist, and new historicist readers of Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> Put simply, the prevailing sentiment on the Right is that Shakespeare transcends his historical moment—he is not for an age but for all time—because his genius allowed him to capture what is most true, universal, and enduring about human nature. A recent wave of counter-criticism, however, has focused close attention on the various ways in which the playwright's texts participate in, are subversive of, or reflect on Renaissance institutional practice and ideologies designed to oppress and control the people. Both these approaches to Shakespeare are ideological, and both are, for different reasons and to different degrees (discussed in detail in this volume), prone to disguising their ideological content. Traditional criticism, in particular, is ordinarily aligned with the dominant culture and contains little or no impetus in its politics or method for self-critique.<sup>2</sup> In addition to a greater self-awareness, a large contingent of Marxist, cultural materialist, and feminist critics consider it a crucial part of their mission not only to reinterpret Shakespeare but also to expose the conservative ideologies which quietly shape the orthodox readings of the plays.<sup>3</sup>

During the last decade, the literary criticism of the Left has matured to the extent that it has come to represent a powerful and viable alternative to the old historicism and New Criticism which have dominated English departments

for the better portion of this century.<sup>4</sup> Whereas a radical approach to literature might have presented traditionalists with an unpleasant anomaly in the not too distant past, today there is a feeling of deep apprehension among many of them that the Left will soon control English departments, the curriculum, and the professional journals and university presses—an apprehension manifesting itself in the call to rescue the traditional canon of Western Civilization from being dislodged from anthologies and course syllabi by the literatures of women, minorities, and ideologies.

Although Richard Levin would robustly reject the suggestion that he is anxious about the inroads made by the Left in the academy,<sup>5</sup> he nonetheless has taken it upon himself to critique a variety of its methodological and ideological assumptions. *Shakespeare Left and Right* grew out of a Special Session of the Modern Language Association on the Role of Ideology in Shakespeare studies, held in Washington, D.C., in December 1989. I proposed the Session to the MLA organizers for a very specific reason: to facilitate in a public forum the continuation of a rather heated if not bitter exchange in *PMLA*'s Forum over the publication of Richard Levin's "Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy." A letter to the editor, cosigned by 24 scholars, denounced Levin's essay as a paternalistic, reductive, "tired, muddled, unsophisticated" piece unworthy of publication in *PMLA* (Adelman et al. 77–78). At the close of his Forum Reply to his 24 detractors, Levin registered his dismay at what he perceived as a lack of substance concerning the charges brought against him. He expressed the hope to engage his critics at some point "into a real discussion of the issues" (79) he had tried to raise, so that some kind of consensus might be attained. I felt that such a discussion—the record of which is printed in part one of this volume—should take place for at least three reasons.

First, with the publication of "Feminist Thematics" in the profession's supposed flagship journal, Richard Levin touched (perhaps inadvertently) on matters of tremendous significance to critics on the Left and the Right. For reasons explored in detail in this collection, Levin's essay and the Forum letter brought to the fore urgent questions about censorship, oppression, discrimination, and reverse discrimination—all of which have a direct bearing on the national debate over politics and art. For anyone like myself who believes that the aesthetic and the ideological are necessarily intertwined in literature and literary criticism, a controversy which makes this alliance explicit is of intrinsic interest. Second, like many others, I was deeply intrigued to learn what the "real discussion" Levin had alluded to would sound like, if indeed the opposing voices in this debate could come to some kind of shared understanding as to what in fact the salient "issues" are.

Third, a vigorous public exchange between advocates of established and

new critical approaches is in itself an infrequent and exciting phenomenon, and therefore worthy of further consideration. While critical innovation is always indebted to already institutionalized modes of critical discourse, it is also true that new critical movements almost invariably carve themselves a place in the academy at the expense of established approaches. New approaches, driven by an assortment of professional and ideological factors, routinely seize upon elements in traditional approaches (considered no longer compelling) for the specific purpose of replacing or displacing them. Names like *New Criticism*, *new historicism*, *post-structuralism*, and *deconstruction* signal an unmistakable effort to supersede and displace that which came before. Given a view of the university which emphasizes tenure and career, there is, of course, nothing surprising about this. What is surprising is that established scholars in the later stages of their careers rarely defend themselves in print against these efforts to displace them, to render them largely obsolete.<sup>6</sup> Richard Levin is one of the most vocal exceptions to this rule.<sup>7</sup> Publishing his views in such prominent journals as *PMLA*, *Textual Practice*, *Modern Philology*, and *New Literary History*, he may be the only representative of a generation of scholars of the Renaissance drama trained in the 1950s who is trying not only to hold his critical ground but who has also launched an admonishing and systematic offensive against the new critical schools.

Levin's effort is, needless to say, provocative and also potentially useful to Shakespeare studies for a number of reasons. It presents feminist, neo-Marxist, and new historicist criticism with a challenge, one which would ideally help these approaches strengthen their interpretative methods. Second, Levin's work indirectly gives us a complex but instructive picture of the mind set of a segment of the profession by appealing, according to Carol Cook, to an "audience of traditional literary scholars who have felt displaced and bypassed by the rapid movement of literary theory into new difficult areas." Levin may well wish to distance himself from some of the reactionary voices that are speaking out in his defense, but, as Cook argues, it is too late for that now: these voices have been encouraged to speak by "the appeal of Levin's essay and the 'us against the feminist hordes' mentality it endorses." Finally, Levin's work is useful simply because he *reads* and *engages* the new criticisms in the pages of some of our profession's most prestigious journals. Speaking for a group of feminist critics, who first emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Gayle Greene laments the fact that "older colleagues don't read us," and that "contemporaries and younger colleagues . . . either ignore us . . . or attempt to climb to the top on our bodies."<sup>8</sup> Greene cares little for the way Levin reads feminist criticism of Shakespeare, but, as she noted in a verbal aside that day in Washington, *at least* Levin reads us.

The MLA Session papers by Levin, Greene, Michael D. Bristol, and respondent Victoria Kahn, and the subsequent labors of Gerald Graff, Edward Pechter, Carol Cook, and Michael Sprinker certainly do not produce the consensus Levin is in search of, but they do help to clarify some of the local tensions and, more importantly, the larger issues at stake in the Levin controversy.<sup>9</sup> Taken as a whole, the essays in part one resolve some of the specific points of friction between Levin and his detractors, but they also aim to take up broader issues suggested by this debate: how—if at all—do critics communicate with each other? what is the role played by ideology in such communications? and what are the possibilities for a critique of ideology (something which both Levin and his Marxist and feminist detractors hold out for).

If the contributors to part one are primarily concerned with theory and ideology, the essays in part two of this book seek to make visible the ideology or value systems implicitly present in literary criticism of the plays and/or in the plays themselves. For example, in his essay on *Julius Caesar*, Darryl J. Gless reflects on the “processes of reading which have helped make Allan Bloom a popular cultural commentator, and helped him make Shakespeare father to his own patterns of blindness and bias.” Joseph A. Porter explores the role of ideology in the construction and development of the term “character” in Shakespeare studies by looking at what “character” meant to Samuel Johnson, Maurice Morgann, S. T. Coleridge, William Hazlitt and more recent critics. Harry Berger, Jr., in turn, critiques a number of critical approaches (including those generated by the Left) to the *Henriad*, shows where they are reductive, and proceeds to construct a complex new “rhizomatic” model of reading designed specifically for the *Henriad*. In his essay on *1 Henry IV*, David Scott Kastan takes issue with Stephen Greenblatt’s theory of containment and the idea that the theater merely produces and legitimizes “the ideology of royal power.” Following a recent trend among historicist critics to hold out for “a space for the resistance to power,”<sup>10</sup> Kastan points out that “the labile and unlegitimated representations of the popular theater prevent the drama, regardless of any overt political intentions . . . from simply reproducing the dominant ideology.” He then goes on to examine the subversive impact of the subplot on the representation of monarchical authority in the play. Chris Fitter mounts a polemical attack against Kenneth Branagh’s film of *Henry V*, which he argues “immorally” resanctifies an Anglophone imperialism which Shakespeare’s play demystifies.

In a conscious effort to include the important work done in gender studies which, as Gayle Greene has noted, is often allotted only limited space in revisionary anthologies on the Renaissance, part two of this book also presents

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four essays with an explicitly feminist orientation. In addition to Gless's reconsideration of Portia's profound impact on Brutus and *Julius Caesar* as a whole, Graham Holderness retrieves from *Richard II* "vestigial traces of femininity"; while Katharine Eisaman Maus demonstrates that *Love's Labor's Lost*'s linguistic issues, frequently discussed in a supposedly neutral context, are in fact "inseparable from [the play's] generic, comic concern with sexual politics and with the construction of a gendered identity in a social context." Marilyn L. Williamson explores the surplus of violence produced when gender ideology is intruded upon by political ideology in *Coriolanus* and *Macbeth*.

In our society, ideology is something of a dirty word. It's a word politicians (and literary critics) use to discredit and to dismiss their otherwise "distinguished" opponents. In the public arena of contemporary American politics, ideology seems primarily associated with voices of the extreme Left or Right. Conceivably, this is the historical residue of potent anti-Nazi and cold war propaganda machines. Notwithstanding the fact that the old apparatus has momentarily stalled, the term ideology still generally connotes political extremism and an anti-democratic agenda. The availability of the term therefore offers an instant opportunity to smear anyone willing to use it against a political adversary (regardless of the adversary's actual politics). Ideology deserves a better fate, not least because it is a far more subtle and sophisticated concept, but also because it offers a powerful analytical tool capable of exposing the political agenda of those who distort its meaning.

Louis Althusser argues with cogency that "those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology" (175). His point is that none of us, regardless of our race, gender, class or education, is in a position to transcend social, economic, and institutional constraints placed on us in the historical moment. We may be capable of rising above some of the forces that constitute our context, but not all. In trying to articulate the delicate balance between human autonomy and wholesale determinism, Marx declared that "men make their own history but not under conditions of their own choosing" (*Eighteenth Brumaire* 15). For Althusser, the economic and social "conditions" under which we make our choices always remain mystified to a significant degree. But this is only in part due to the presence of ideology as a recognizable and definable body of doctrine or "false consciousness" put to work by a powerful elite for the purpose of oppressing the members of the lower strata of the society. Althusser's "ideology" is also an inescapable mode of cognition, a mode which finds expression in the "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). However, since we do not experience this "relationship" as imaginary, it becomes clear that ideology, in a sense, is

not “false consciousness,” but consciousness itself. The cognitive view, which holds any specific embodiment of ideology to be illusory (alluding to reality without corresponding to that reality), has a history prior to Althusser’s powerful articulation of it. We find the idea implanted in what Voloshinov described in the 1920s as a group or society’s “lived,” “most fundamental” and inarticulable “social evaluations.” And Jonathan Dollimore has recently argued that Montaigne’s conception of custom, defined “as embedded in social practices, institutions and rituals,” already shares crucial features of “ideology” (*Radical Tragedy* 18). As Michael Sprinker has noted, on the whole, “the impact of Althusserianism in the United States has never been especially great” (*Imaginary Relations* 2), but the recent predilection in the academy for a politically self-conscious criticism, combined with the powerful promise of new interpretive strategies afforded by a conception of ideology as partially invisible or silent (to be recouped by the critic), has granted the broader definition of ideology tremendous currency in Renaissance literary studies.

This is not to suggest that the more orthodox view of ideology as a definable body of doctrine has disappeared from the political arena or the academy. On the contrary, if anything the Reagan-Bush era has helped to foster an unequivocal reaffirmation of the position that it is always the “other” who is ideological. For instance, a television commercial for the reelection of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms in 1990 labeled Helms’s Democratic opponent as a champion of “liberal values” while ascribing to the Senator, *by contrast*, “North Carolina values.” In the ad, “liberal” clearly stands for a political ideology, while Helms attempts to equate himself with the fundamental identity and values of the state. That North Carolina is a state deeply divided on a wide range of political/ideological issues—a division which precisely calls the state’s identity into question—is of course overlooked. Helms’s effort to transcend actual political conditions may appear all too transparent and feeble, but Althusser’s observation about our inhabitation of ideology (despite our conviction that we are outside of it) does raise some serious epistemological dilemmas. How, if we are all *in* ideology, is it possible to offer an objective critique of even so simplistic an example as the Helms commercial—let alone the work of a sophisticated literary critic or a Renaissance playwright?

If we are all in ideology, then it would only be reasonable to assume that every critique of ideology is itself necessarily ideological. Every critique would require its own critique, and so on, producing an infinite regress of critiques without any hope for non-ideological knowledge. Bristol and Sprinker press for a scientific approach to ideology, while Richard Levin suggests that we can only resolve the present epistemological dilemma by appealing to objectivism,

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pluralism, and rationalism. In Levin's view, we gain objective knowledge of a text by defining knowledge within the parameters of the particular critical approach that gathers it. If one proceeds in this way, Levin maintains, "various approaches can attain such knowledge in their own terms, since they are not 'intervening' to 'produce' different objects but are only different ways of viewing the object." Reason, which Levin holds to be "neutral," is called on to perform a critique of a given approach, for instance, by reproving it "for being inconsistent with the postulates of that approach." For Levin, reason thus promotes meaningful communication between critics of different methodological and political persuasions without running the risk of reducing literary criticism into an argument about politics. Most of Levin's co-contributors share a desire for better communications, but Greene, Bristol, Kahn, and Pechter all seem to agree that an appeal to "neutral reason" serves, in the words of Gerald Graff, only "to reproduce the circularity in which the [present] controversy has been trapped," insofar as it ignores the complex matrix of socio-historical and ideological circumstances which shape, guide, and press "reason" into service. Victoria Kahn, who agrees with Levin that there is no "univocal" connection *per se* between a critic's politics and her critical practice, insists that this hardly dissociates critical method from ideology, "precisely because, as Bristol and Greene argue, ideology is not simply a consciously held position." "To recognize this tie is not to reduce art to politics [as Levin would have it]," but rather to acknowledge that texts, regardless of their intended purpose, necessarily contain sets of ideological values. It is for this reason that Gayle Greene exhorts "all critics [to] acknowledge the ideological and political and gendered bases of their judgments."

But this does not remove the epistemological barrier to a non-ideological critique. In fact, Edward Pechter posits (after scrutinizing the efforts of several neo-Marxist critics) that such a critique is simply "unattainable." He further urges that we jettison the term ideology altogether because if "everything is ideology" then "nothing is ideology": "ideology is a positive term without a difference."

By no means do I wish to minimize the logical force and cogency which inform Pechter's stance "against ideology," but I should note here that elimination of the term ideology would mean erasure of the very term that has made a *new* kind of political criticism possible. It is precisely the tendency of much literary criticism (on both the Left and Right) to present itself as non-ideological or apolitical that makes the availability of the most sophisticated notion of ideology as an analytical tool so useful and necessary. Not, as Althusser would have it, so that we can "interpret" and "discover the reality of the world behind

[the] imaginary representation of that world” (162), but to “interpret” the “representation” in such a way that the social and political values that shape and inform it become visible, intelligible, and articulable.

What we must do, it seems to me, is to give up the demand that a critique of ideology be objective in any absolute sense. Such a demand is itself already profoundly ideological (not objective or impartial) and establishes an arbitrary hierarchy of knowledge that seeks to silence or dominate alternative modes of inquiry.<sup>11</sup> A critique of ideology that acknowledges its positional status is not free from implying the existence of a hierarchy of knowledge (on the contrary, I think that on some level we all value certain ways of reading over others), but it makes that hierarchy an overt and therefore political feature of the critical debate. The *unconscious* dimension of ideology—a dimension which suggests that no critic can ever tell the whole story—is only a relative hindrance here to the execution of a successful critique. As we are shaped by and respond to our ever changing social, economic, and ideological circumstances, we change our values and critical methods and thereby facilitate the exposure of hitherto invisible (or unconscious) ideologies in texts. Such new exposures, needless to say, do not produce unmediated truth. However, “the point is not,” in the words of Graff, “that there is no truth but that truth is never politically neutral . . . .”

Yet there has been a chorus of voices objecting to the (Left’s) politicization of literature. In *The Death of Literature*, for example, Alvin Kernan laments that the new critical approaches strip literature of “positive value” and “social usefulness,” and empty it “out in the service of social and political causes that are considered more important than the texts themselves” (212, 213). If we wish literature to survive, Kernan maintains, critics should cease viewing it as “the instrument of oppression, furthering imperialism and colonialism, establishing male hegemony, suppressing any movement towards freedom from authority” (213). I empathize with the author’s serious qualms about using literature as an ideological whipping boy. Nonetheless, I would argue that in our particular historical moment there is definite “positive value” in exposing and resisting political, racial, or gender-based oppression if and when we encounter it in literary texts, as well as in our own readings or in those of others.

The chances that a new reading of a Shakespeare play will noticeably affect our world are negligible. And yet there is clear value in literary interpretation, particularly in the classroom, because it offers us a chance to try to provide students with some type of antidote to the lack of encouragement for independent thought offered by political and educational institutions, as well as by the media. In his *Necessary Illusions*, a seminal study of the North American



media, eminent linguist and political scientist Noam Chomsky submits compelling evidence that the media, despite frequent charges of subversiveness against it, induce “conformity” by reducing the “general public . . . to its traditional apathy and obedience,” and by driving it “from the arena of political debate and action” (10, 3). In practically every segment of our culture, there is a tendency to limit severely “the range of opinion permitted expression” (12); the result is an insidiously manufactured social consensus. In this volume, Michael Bristol argues against Levin’s call for pluralism—in which all approaches are “seen as equally valid”—precisely because it would “*block* any social consensus at the point where it might ensue in social action.” Bristol’s observations appear to contradict Chomsky’s. However, Chomsky’s “engineering of consent” and Bristol’s pacifying pluralism essentially amount to the same thing: they describe a society in which moderate differences are allowed to exist, but within which there is no opportunity for true opposition. As a society with a tradition of anti-intellectualism, we are not inclined to self-scrutiny. For most of our students, it is simply easier to be a traditionalist than a radical, or even a skeptic. It’s more natural to belong than to question. Indeed, a Budweiser television commercial, geared toward young people nation-wide (including those attending colleges and universities), takes the prohibition on critical debate to its most extreme form in its current slogan: “Why ask why?”—the suggestion being that a six-pack is a preferable alternative to pondering life’s questions. In combatting this state of affairs, we aren’t—or at least I’m not—talking about revolution but about “a course of intellectual self-defense” (Chomsky viii). I utterly agree with Victoria Kahn that we simply can’t give up on “the possibility of persuasion and critique”; if we do the rest will indeed be silence.

When, for example, in *Julius Caesar* Brutus pleads with the plebeians to be absolved of the assassination because it was committed on behalf of Rome—“Who is here so vile that will not love his country?” (3.1.32–33)<sup>12</sup>—it could be productive to urge students to note a parallel to another Republican party which, enthralled by last winter’s military victory, sought to translate the success of Patriot missiles into popular support by equating uncritical support of the war against Iraq with being a good American. “Who is here so vile that will not love his country?” And one could further stress a crucial difference between the two situations. While the politically naive Brutus allows rival Mark Antony to speak beside the bleeding body of Caesar, our administration, during the period of the military build-up, made a concerted effort to limit the political debate about the pending war. It is unquestionably disturbing to see that a simplistic equation between patriotism and support for the war can be so effective, and that the government of a democratic nation seeks to curb