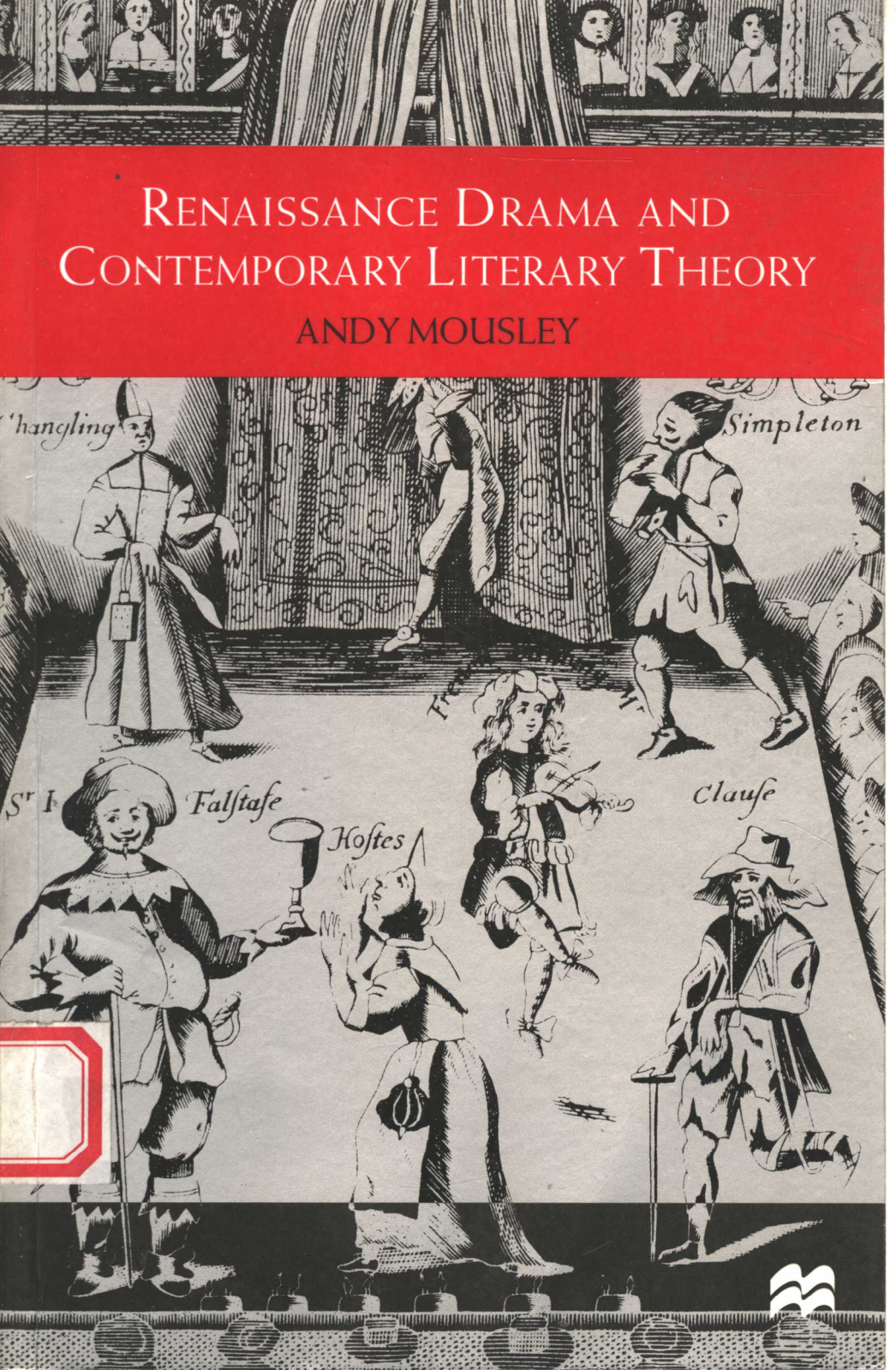
Renaissance Drama and Contemporary Literary Theory

Andy Mousley



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First published 2000 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 0-333-69458-9 hardcover
ISBN 0-333-69459-7 paperback

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00

Printed in Hong Kong

Published in the United States of America by
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.
Scholarly and Reference Division,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
ISBN 0-312-23173-3 (cloth)
ISBN 0-312-23174-1 (paper)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Makiko Minow-Pinkney and Janet Lewison for their comments on draft chapters and for talking through with me some of the subjects discussed in the book. John Peacocke has also been badly exploited as a sounding board. A long-standing source of both tangible and intangible inspiration has been Bernard Sharratt and the books of Bernard Sharratt. Thanks, also, to Margaret Bartley for her unwavering support and to Bolton Institute for granting me study leave. The gratitude that comes with bottles of Cava and much love is to Debbie, who has helped me in all ways. The gratitude that comes with summer games is to the incommensurable Dan.

By thanking these people, I don't mean to incriminate them: the book's foibles are mine.

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Introduction

The aims of this introduction are to identify the differences that modern literary theory has made to literary studies, and to explore the continuities which also exist between old and new critical approaches. Having offered an overview of literary theory's challenges, shortcomings and complex relationship with its main predecessor, humanism, the rest of the book will be devoted to examining specific theories in detail, tracing their similarities and dissimilarities, and putting them into practice.

LOVE *OR* THEORY?

To be paid to read, teach and write about literature might be thought a labour of love. People still speak, after all, of having a 'love' of literature, a passion for reading, as though the relationship that can form between a reader and a text is every bit as intense and meaningful as an actual relationship. The feminist critic Hélène Cixous believes that literary criticism should originate in love:

> Everything begins with love. If we work on a text we don't love, we are automatically at the wrong distance. This happens in many institutions where, in general, one works on a text as if it were an object, using theoretical instruments. It's perfectly possible to make a machine out of the text, to treat it like a machine and be treated by it like a machine. The contemporary tendency has been to find theoretical instruments, a reading technique which has bridled the text, mastered it like a wild horse with saddle and bridle, enslaving it. I am wary of formalist approaches, those which cut up structure, which impose their systematic grid.[1]

Cixous places before us a fairly stark choice: between love and theory, between intimate and impersonal ways of reading. We shall need to think carefully about Cixous's characterisation of theoretically informed reading as loveless and mechanistic, but

before doing so, I want to explore further the idea of reading with love, and locate it as an example of a humanist approach to literature. Humanism is the label that is often stuck on the kinds of literary criticism which were practised before the advent of modern literary theory, whereas anti-humanism is often tagged to modern theoretical approaches – witness Cixous's own image of theoretical 'instruments' clinically dissecting an object thereby rendered inanimate.[2] The labels contain some truth, but they are misleading in the way that labels often are. Not all theory is loveless. Not all theory is anti-humanist. Humanism and anti-humanism can mean different things. Anti-humanism is not necessarily a 'bad thing'. Humanism is not necessarily a 'good thing'. So let us begin by looking at some of the several things that reading with love, or reading from a humanist perspective, can mean.

HUMANIST LITERARY CRITICISMS

Cixous says that the text will treat us as we treat it: 'It's perfectly possible to make a machine out of the text, to treat it like a machine and be treated by it like a machine.' The corollary of this is that if we love the text, the text will love us back. Using the language of love that Cixous prefers to the language of machines, we might think of the literary text, not as 'object' of analysis, but as a kind of love letter, addressed to us, which draws us in by speaking intimately to us. A somewhat troubling example of someone reading in this way occurs in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. The killjoy servant Malvolio is tricked into thinking that his mistress Olivia is in love with him through the ploy of a forged love poem and letter. The scene in which the deceived Malvolio reads the poem and letter is overlooked by his deceivers:

> *Malvolio.* [*Reads*]
> "I may command where I adore,
> But silence, like a Lucrece knife,
> With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore.
> M. O. A. I. doth sway my life."
> *Fabian.* A fustian riddle.
> *Toby.* Excellent wench, say I.
> *Malvolio.* "M. O. A. I. doth sway my life." Nay but first, let me see, let me see, let me see.

> *Fabian.* What dish o' poison has she dressed him!
> *Toby.* And with what wing the staniel checks at it!
> *Malvolio.* "I may command where I adore." Why, she may command me: I serve her; she is my lady. Why, this is evident to any formal capacity. There is no obstruction in this. And the end; what should that alphabetical position portend? If I could make that resemble something in me! Softly, "M. O. A. I.".[3]

The amorous text calls to Malvolio, almost but not quite spelling out his name. In the context of a love poem, the written marks 'M. O. A. I.' are not coldly anonymous marks which he can take or leave. They are not designed to breed indifference. They are a hook, intended to involve. The letter is for him – or so it seems.

The phrase used by Malvolio – 'If I could make that resemble something in me!' – can serve as an aphorism for one way of thinking about a humanist conception of literature. From a humanist perspective, we might be thought of as reading, like Malvolio, to find ourselves lovingly mirrored in the text. The text is from this perspective an act of confirmation, it consolidates a sense of who we are. The pleasure of literature is thus the pleasure of *identification*. Identification depends upon a recognition of what is already supposed to exist, of what we already intuitively or subconsciously know (about ourselves, about the world, about others), but which the literary text makes explicit. Love, like reading, can make us captive, and perhaps part of being a captive audience or reader is based upon the idea that what we are seeing or reading is profoundly and intensely true to experience. The text, it seems, strikes a chord. We cannot help but be affected by a text, and get on intimate terms with it, because it speaks to us about who we are.

Humanist critics have often emphasised the notion that great literature communicates human truths. F. R. Leavis, for example, whose writing is often taken to exemplify an influential strand of twentieth-century humanist literary criticism, values literature for the human 'life' that it embodies. The 'impact' of T. S. Eliot's 'genius', according to Leavis, is its 'disturbing force' which makes it 'therefore capable of ministering to life'.[4] Another such humanist appeal to literature as the place where we recognise ourselves is the claim, made by Helen Gardner, a contemporary of Leavis, that 'Certain books, and certain ideas which we meet

with in our reading, move us deeply and become part of our way of thinking because they make us conscious of the meaning of our own experience and reveal us to ourselves.'[5] It would not be difficult to find further examples, dating from various times before the advent of modern literary theory, of this type of humanist literary criticism, such is the influence which it has had on literary studies.

However, humanism is not monolithic. Identification with human life as we already think we know it is one way of thinking about humanist literary criticism. Another is to think about the text as a journey of exploration which takes us, not to the same places – the places we already know – but to new ones. Would our interest in the text, or love object, to revert back to the Cixous vocabulary, be sustained if the text was without an element of mystery? Malvolio *thinks* he can find himself in the love letter he reads, but he is not absolutely sure that his name is intended. The letter is a tease, inviting identification but also postponing it. So he ponders the letter, repeating its phrases, wondering whether he has read it aright. The letters 'M, O, A, I' form a secret hieroglyph, or 'simulation', as Malvolio himself calls them (II.v.139), which will not quite reveal their hidden meaning. If Malvolio's narcissism, his 'self-love', as Olivia refers to it (I.v.89), tells him that he is indeed the letter's addressee, then the slight element of doubt which nags him suggests that there might be something else that the letter is saying, something frustratingly but also enticingly beyond Malvolio.

Literature, according to a second humanist perspective, can enlarge and expand our consciousness, and take us out of ourselves (or further into them) on a journey of discovery. The discovery metaphor is used to describe the role of criticism in the following comment of A. E. Dyson:

> The critical forum is a place of vigorous conflict and disagreement, but there is nothing in this to cause dismay. What is attested is the complexity of human experience and the richness of literature, not any chaos or relativity of taste. A critic is better seen, no doubt, as an explorer than an 'authority', but explorers ought to be, and usually are, well equipped. The effect of good criticism is to convince us of what C. S. Lewis called 'the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors'.[6]

Literature is still thought about in humanist terms, but the emphasis is now less on what we already know than upon the unknown depths and possibilities of the human.

Humanist literary criticism can thus involve identification ('that's me!', 'that's the way the world is!') and/or exploration ('"the enormous extension of our being"', in C. S. Lewis's phrase). If reading as a humanist means reading with love, then various amorous scenarios may be said to be involved: the captive reader/lover who hangs on the text's/love object's each and every word and takes them to be profoundly 'true'; the reader/lover who is taken on a voyage of *discovery* by the text/love object and so further enamoured/captivated by that aspect of the love object/text which is enticingly 'other'. And so on.

The point of likening reading to loving is to emphasise the way that literature, within a humanist context, is supposed to *matter* to us in such a way as to become the site of intense emotional and psychological investment. It is difficult to ignore a love letter, especially when the love object – as has often been the case with literature – is placed on a pedestal: Dyson's words are written in reverence of the work of art; one of Leavis's phrases is 'intensely admire' – '*Salutation* . . . [is] a poem I intensely admire.'[7] Such reverence and admiration are based upon the supposed power of revelation of the work of art, and speak to the way literature has taken over from religion as a source of supposedly timeless truths, which guide and nurture. The word 'canon' was formerly a religious word, one use of which was to designate a list of authorised sacred texts. Transferred to a secular context, a literary 'canon' refers to a valued body of writing which, like a sacred text, is deemed to be permanently meaningful.[8] Given the continuing relevance of the great work of art, how can one fail to be deeply affected by it? How can one *not* be on intimate, loving terms with words which spell out our names?

I have spent some time reconstructing humanism for several reasons: first, because, in books of this kind, humanism is often treated quickly and/or dismissively and/or as an homogeneous concept; second, because the full impact of modern literary theory can only fully be appreciated via comparison with what came before it; and third, to indicate how humanist assumptions still inform the way people read and, to anticipate a later phase of my argument, still inform *some* versions of modern literary theory.

HUMANISM *VERSUS* ANTI-HUMANISM

What, then, is the difference which modern literary theory has made? The opposition to which Cixous appeals, between reading lovingly and reading theoretically, offers a way of articulating the difference in fairly strong, unequivocal terms. It will be useful to do this initially, because an exaggerated case is a clarified case and because modern literary theory and humanism *have* often been clear antagonists. However, the account will gradually be toned down and complexities dealt with.

Theory, as characterised by Cixous, may be thought of as intruding, like the father in psychoanalytic theory (see Chapter 4), upon the scene of intimate humanist communion between text and reader and issuing a series of anti-humanist commandments. If modern literary theory could be broken down into axioms then these might be them:

1. *Be suspicious of identification*, for identification seduces us into passive and uncritical acceptance of the way people supposedly are or the way the world supposedly is. One should instead question the identifications which a text is proffering by asking: what am I being asked to identify with, on what terms, and on behalf of what agenda? What am I, as a reader, being asked to feel and think? How is this text manipulating me? How is it *constructing* ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman?
2. *Do not treat language as transparent.* Language should not be treated as though it provided a transparent 'window' through which we are given an unobstructed view of human or other kinds of reality. Language should instead be closely interrogated for the assumptions about the world which are presented – as assumptions usually are – as 'true'. Consider again the metaphor – of exploration – which Dyson uses to describe the role of the critic: 'A critic is better seen . . . as an explorer than as an "authority", but explorers ought to be, and usually are, well equipped.' Is this not a rather colonialist metaphor which casts critics and writers alike in the role of heroic and independent pioneers who are seemingly unencumbered by social and historical determinations?
3. *Decentre the self*, for what is the 'self' that is so central to humanist discourses other than the product of history, language

and unconscious forces? Theory has regularly invoked the mighty triptych of Marx, Saussure and Freud to undermine the concept of the self as a free, autonomous and rational agent, thereby deflecting attention away from the self and on to historical and social determinations (Marx), language (Saussure), and unconscious forces (Freud).

4. *Purge your critical vocabulary of humanist terms.* Words and phrases such as 'life', 'ministering to life', 'first-hand experience', 'human being', 'enormous extension of our being', 'consciousness', 'genius', 'individual', 'insight into human nature' and 'intuition' have by and large been dropped by modern theoretical approaches in favour of 'structure', 'system', 'systems of meaning', 'linguistic and social codes', 'social and linguistic construction of identity', 'discourse' and 'inscription'. The precise nature of the shift in vocabulary which has taken place is exemplified in the displacement of the humanist word 'influence' by the post-humanist, theoretical term 'intertextuality'. Their meaning is comparable, 'intertextuality' referring to the way in which no text exists in isolation of other texts, but where 'influence' is suggestive of interpersonal or quasi-interpersonal contact between people, intertextuality rewrites influence as an impersonally linguistic or textual phenomenon which happens independently of human agents.[9]

These, then, are some of the founding axioms of modern literary theory. Cixous is thus in many ways correct: theory *is* loveless, depersonalising and anti-humanist, in that it breaks up that cosily intimate bond between admiring reader and admired text, and asks us to ask questions. It is reductive, however, to characterise the anti-humanism of theory in an entirely negative way (in the way that Cixous tends to, for example), for the anti-humanism of theory may be seen as its intellectual strength. In the place of identification, it puts critical consciousness. In the place of subjective involvement, it asks us to look beyond the individual to the determination of subjects by language, history and the unconscious. In the place of passive acceptance and/or reverential awe ('how true', 'that's so true to life'), it puts an active, questioning scepticism ('with what am I being asked to identify?', 'by what means is the text attempting to make me complicit with it?'). And in the place of subjective impressionism and intuition

('the writer seems to capture perfectly the natural rhythm of rural life'), it puts more precise as well as *attainable* technical and intellectual resources (the signifier and signified of linguistic theory, for example – see Chapter 1).

Modern literary theory *is* alienating, but alienation is no bad thing if it means becoming estranged from ways of thinking that have become so habitual that we no longer truly 'think' about them. The anti-humanism of modern literary theory can therefore be understood in positive as well as negative ways. Positively, theory encourages critical consciousness, scepticism, and technical/professional expertise. Negatively, theory heralds the further professionalisation, now in a bad sense, of literary studies, and the domination of the impersonal, technical and technocratic language of theory over the more idiosyncratic and intuitive skills nurtured by humanist literary criticism.[10] The choice that Cixous places before us, between love and theory, humanism and anti-humanism, is still stark (in that it is still an either/or), but I have hopefully gone some way towards redressing Cixous's prejudice against theory, by outlining the advantages and disadvantages of *both* humanist and anti-humanist approaches. There should, now, be a sense of a genuinely difficult choice.

LOVE *AND* THEORY, HUMANISM *AND* ANTI-HUMANISM

The final complication to be added to this introductory narrative is to qualify, without completely dismantling, the stark opposition between the humanism of pre-modern-theoretical criticism and the anti-humanism of modern theory. As I suggested earlier, not all literary theory is anti-humanist, impersonal and loveless. Some theories are anti-humanist in some respects but not in others, or eschew one form of humanism in favour of another. This last point seems to me to be vital, for too often humanism has been taken to mean one thing only: namely, a theology of 'man' (the gender is deliberate) as a free, sovereign, rational agent, and autonomous centre of consciousness. *This* humanism has plenty of opponents in modern literary theory and has on numerous occasions been questioned and/or pronounced dead. Witness the following examples:

> In our day, and once again Nietzsche indicated the turning

> point from a long way off, it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed as the end of man.[11]

> So I accept the characterization of aesthete in so far as I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man.[12]

> linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors.[13]

> Common sense proposes a *humanism* based on an *empiricist–idealist* interpretation of the world. In other words, common sense urges that 'man' is the origin and source of meaning, action, and of history (*humanism*). Our concepts and our knowledge are held to be the product of experience (*empiricism*), and this experience is produced and interpreted by the mind, reason or thought, the property of a transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual (*idealism*). These propositions, radically called into question by the implications of post-Saussurean linguistics, constitute the basis of a practice of reading which assumes, whether explicitly or implicitly, the theory of expressive realism.[14]

Unfortunately, and as some of these examples demonstrate, because the humanism which theory attacks is often taken to represent the whole of humanism, it becomes difficult to imagine any other kind. Certain varieties of modern literary theory can nevertheless be construed as humanist despite their own use of the term as a catch-all category.

If there are thus vital differences between humanist forms of literary criticism and their modern theoretical counterparts, there are continuities as well, depending on which texts are taken to be representative and how one reads them. Although it is very difficult, in many cases, to build bridges between the old and the new, there are still many other examples where continuities exist. So what kind of humanism is it that persists into the modern theoretical regime of literary criticism?

If I think of myself, in accordance with the type of humanism

which theory has often attacked, as a language-independent and society-independent free agent, then there is not much reason for me to be overly concerned about language, society or history. If my conception of who I am does not seem to depend upon linguistic and social processes, then such processes will not seem to matter much. On the one hand, there is 'me', and, on the other, there are things such as language and history in which I may have a passing academic interest but which do not much detain me. It seems to me that while a good many literary theorists decentre the self and refocus attention upon language and history, some of them leave intact the opposition between psyche and society, or subject and signifier, by treating language and society as impersonal systems which have little or nothing to do with the psyche. The kinds of literary theory (for example, structuralism, formalism, and some varieties of Marxism and poststructuralism) that do this are unremittingly anti-humanist. However, there are other – feminist, historicist, psychoanalytic, and again Marxist and poststructuralist – inflections of literary theory which decentre the self while retaining a humanist dimension. They do both of these things at once by overcoming the psyche/society opposition and *writing the psyche back into society, language and history* at the same time as *writing society, language and history back into the psyche.* The subject is thus returned to language, history and society; and language, history and society are returned to the subject. If my conception of who I am takes into account my dependence upon linguistic, social and historical processes, I am much more likely to invest these processes with psychological and emotional meaning.

Reading with love, as though texts matter to us, was one of the great strengths of humanist criticism. The humanism which has survived within literary theory retains the notion that reading catalyses an intense and meaningful relationship between text and reader but broadens it. The intense encounter between text and reader acts as a model, as it were, for the rediscovered relationship between self and language, self and society, self and history. If literature was once the privileged site of an intense experiential encounter, then within some strands of modern literary theory, language, history and society now occupy that zone of intensity where we work out what we are. Language, history and society thereby become *expressive* instead of mute, inexpressive and/or impersonally indifferent to the subject.

MODERN LITERARY THEORY AND RENAISSANCE DRAMA

But why Renaissance drama? Why apply modern literary theories, in the sustained way that this book will, to Renaissance plays? One answer would be, well, why not? Theory would surely not have had the impact that it has had unless its insights were applicable to a range of texts, genres and historical periods. However, this answer strikes me as slightly unsatisfactory, for it smacks of that negatively mechanistic approach to texts so disliked by Cixous. It makes of theories a series of templates which can be superimposed on any text regardless – to put it in humanist terms – of its living, breathing, unique qualities. 'Have theory, will travel.' Thought of in this way, as a kind of globally valid credit card or passport, theory will get you access to anything and anywhere you want. From Renaissance drama to *Beowulf* to the Koran – everything can be processed through the machine of theory.

So how can Renaissance drama become a more active partner in this potentially unequal marriage? How can the *specificity* of Renaissance drama, and the further specificities of individual Renaissance plays be taken account of? It seems to me that Renaissance drama plays its own distinctive series of variations upon the conflicts and concerns which my introduction has been outlining – so much so that is tempting to think that the Renaissance is at least *one* of their places of origin. Take, as one famous example, the example of Hamlet and Hamlet's attitude towards what he refers to as the 'customary suits' of mourning:

> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,
> Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
> Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
> Together with all the forms, moods, shapes of grief,
> That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
> For they are actions that a man might play,
> But I have that within which passes show,
> These but the trappings and the suits of woe.[15]

A rift is opened here between signs and psyche, public and private, external displays of grief and internal feeling. Because signs

are taken by Hamlet to be *in*expressive, he turns away from them into his 'own' interior world.

Hamlet's recoil from the visible world is one of many examples in the Renaissance and Renaissance drama of the dissociation of feeling from public life. Religious reformers, for instance, made their own, different contribution to the 'silencing' of external phenomena, by downgrading the mainly Catholic doctrine of justification by works and upgrading justification by faith. Works were thereby rendered less expressive of religious belief than the faith that supposedly came from within. The story of the disappearance of psyche from society is a complex one, far more complex than the brief discussion of these two examples suggests. They nevertheless serve to make the point that modern theory does not suddenly appear from nowhere, but is implicated in various, complex histories – it is again important to emphasise the plural – such as the one I have just gestured towards. To recognise some of the ways in which the concerns of the Renaissance/Renaissance drama anticipate some of the concerns of theory makes for a more equal, mutually illuminating relationship: theory is no longer the master machine which processes and illuminates texts, for the texts themselves now cast significant light upon theory.

The way in which this book therefore understands theories and the way they interrelate has not been reached in the absence of Renaissance drama. The plays have exerted considerable influence over the way in which I think theory and apply theory to them. Instead of using them as blank slates upon which theory may write what it will, the plays have in many ways cued the kinds of theory that seem appropriate to them. Incest in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, for example, cued psychoanalysis; the volatility of love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and of self in *Hamlet*, poststructuralism; tragedy's preoccupation with foundations, structuralism; money in *A Shoemaker's Holiday*, Marxism. In these specific, and the more general ways outlined above, the drama has driven the choice as well as the understanding of theory.