

AA306: Shakespeare : text and performance
AA306/VCR7: Critical interventions

Producer: Jenny Bardwell

Contributor(s) in the clip:

Stephen Greenblatt

Terence Hawkes

Kiernan Ryan

Clip transcript: AA306 Cultural Materialism

Stephen Greenblatt:

We've heard a lot in recent years about two versions of historicist criticism, and new historicism which tends to be the term used in the United States, and cultural materialism which seems to be the term favoured in Britain. The way I understand is that new historicism, if we take a play like Macbeth would look at the extent to which the play is in dialogue with other texts, so of significance to a new historicist criticism would be things like proceedings of witchcraft trials, King James' writings on kingship for instance. Cultural materialism is also interested in that kind of relationship between the play and other texts and between the play and social history, but seems to give more emphasis to the political significance of the play now.

Terence Hawkes:

We need to take into account say in reading King Lear, the fact that it takes place, it was written at the time of the gunpowder plot in Shakespeare's Britain, but that it is we are reading it now, say at a time when our own union, the United Kingdom, is facing similar possibilities of splitting up. There are nationalist movements in Scotland, in Wales and notoriously in Ireland that are presenting our society with a similar chasm, a similar possibility of break up that Shakespeare society was presented with, and that's where cultural materialism has something to add that it insists always that we return to the present.

Kiernan Ryan:

What you do if you're a culture materialist is you look for the gaps and silences and contradictions, the little involuntary gestures of the play so to speak, in which the play gives away its guilty collusion with patriarchy or with hierarchy or with the throne in the case of King Lear say, and that the best one can do as it were is switch the spotlight away from say King Lear to Poor Tom the Beggar, or in Macbeth switch the spotlight from Macbeth to The Witches so that the question of gender these marginalised figures on the edges of conventional reality suddenly thrown into the spotlight, thrown into the foreground. And there's a lot of mileage in that and I have great sympathy with it and I use those techniques myself, but there's one fundamental thing wrong with that culture materialist approach which is equally wrong when the new historicists use it, and that is this unargued, unargued unexamined assumption that it is self-evident that Shakespeare's plays must have originally been intended, and subsequently can only be regarded, as reinforcing the status quo of his time. Reinforcing hierarchy, bolstering the power structure of his day, and that they can only go on being conservative unless we read them against the grain or de-mystify them, or expose the extent to which they're in cahoots with power, etc.