FAULTLINES

Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading

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3 When Is a Character Not a Character? Desdemona, Olivia, Lady Macbeth, and Subjectivity

Why, in the Peking Opera, are women's roles played by men?
. . . Because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act.
David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly*

Nothing so true as what you once let fall,
"Most Women have no Characters at all."
Alexander Pope, "To a Lady"

THE DISCONTINUITY OF DESDEMONA

Desdemona is not usually regarded as a problem.[1] Traditionally, she has been celebrated as one of Shakespeare's great women characters—celebrated mainly, of course, by men, since they have dominated the discourses of criticism. But surely there is a great mystery. On her first appearance, Desdemona is spectacularly confident, bold, and unconventional. Summoned to the Senate to explain her elopement with Othello, she justifies herself coolly and coherently, confessing without a blush that she was "half the wooer" (1.3.176).[2] Further, she speaks up uninvited, and on the outrageous theme of women's sexual desire, demanding to go with her husband to Cyprus so that they may consummate the marriage:

> if I be left behind,
> A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
> The rites of love for which I love him are bereft me.
> (1.3.255–57)

Despite such extraordinarily spirited behavior, Desdemona becomes the most conventional spouse. Mainly we see her wheedling for the restoration of Cassio, in the sad posture of the wife trying to manage her husband:

> my lord shall never rest,
> I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience;
> His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift.
> (3.3.22–24)

Even this she does ineptly: despite her earlier intuition on how to address the Senate, she is now stupidly blind to the effect she is having. When Othello starts to abuse her, she is abjectly fearful and consequently dishonest, making matters worse. In her denials, even, she is strangely acquiescent:

> those that do teach young babes
> Do it with gentle means, and easy tasks;
> He might ha' chid me so, for, in good faith,
> I am a child at chiding.
> (4.2.113–60)

She allows herself to be killed with slight protest (5.2.23–85).

Now, I don't think it implausible, in principle, that Desdemona could be so disheartened by Othello's attitude that she might eventually lose all her original spirit and intelligence. How this happens might be elaborated through action, dialogue, and soliloquy. It may not be easy, but Shakespeare is reckoned to be good at this sort of thing—in Othello's case, we may observe his changing attitudes in considerable detail. Desdemona is a disjointed sequence of positions that women are conventionally supposed to occupy. The bold Desdemona of the opening romantic initiative is one possible position—we see it also in Rosalind in *As You Like It,* Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice,* Perdita in *The Winter's Tale.* The nagging spouse is another. Linda Woodbridge wants to believe that early modern authors created full, lively characters, rather than following their own stultifying theories of womanhood, but in this respect she is uneasy nonetheless: "Although Desdemona is no domineering shrew, her behaviour at one point comes dangerously close to stereotype."[3] The final Desdemona, who submits to Othello's abuse and violence, takes the posture of other abused women in texts of the period—sitting like Patience on a monument, as Viola puts it in *Twelfth Night.*[4] It is almost as if the Wife of Bath were reincarnated as Griselda. If most critics have not noticed this discontinuity in Desdemona, it is because each of her appearances is plausible in itself, insofar as it corresponds to one of the models for "woman" that prevail in our cultures; and because, as Catherine Belsey observes, "discontinuity of being" can be read as the "inconstancy" that is supposed to be typically "feminine."[5]

Desdemona has no character of her own; she is a convenience in the story of Othello, Iago, and Venice. Othello asks, "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write 'whore' upon?" (4.2.73–74). The writing is done by Othello, Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, the Duke, and Lodovico—they take Desdemona as a blank page for the versions of her that they want. She is written into a script that is organized through the perceptions and needs of male dominance in heterosexuality and patriarchal relations.[6]

Janet Adelman has identified a similar pattern in the presentation of Cressida. Despite her argument elsewhere that we should "respond to Shakespeare's characters as whole psychological entities," Adelman finds that "characters may not always permit us to respond to them in this way."[7] The early scenes of *Troilus and Cressida,* she shows, "establish not only some sense of Cressida but also the expectation that we will be allowed to know her as a full character, that she will maintain her relationship with us" (p. 122). But from the time when she arrives in the Greek camp, she appears as "a mere character type, a person with no conflict or inwardness at all." There are several ways, Adelman says, in which we might imagine motivations for Cressida, but the text affords "no enlightenment." Thus the play seems to enact the fantasy that Cressida becomes radically unknowable, irreducibly other, at the moment of her separation from Troilus (pp. 127–28). Adelman's argument as to why this should be is complex and psychoanalytic; ultimately, she says, "the necessities of Troilus' character, rather than of Cressida's require her betrayal of him. . . . she becomes a whore to keep him pure" (pp. 137–38). And this suits not only Troilus, of course: Adelman could easily have shown how Cressida's behavior has seemed, to many critics, no more than we should expect. Like Desdemona, Cressida is organized to suit her role in the story of the men. A character is not a character when she or he is needed to shore up a patriarchal representation.

FREUD ON LADY MACBETH

Freud's comments on Lady Macbeth do not produce a distinctive psychoanalytic insight, but his readiness not to accept common sense at face value leads him to ask a question that we have not often heard. Freud is struck by Lady Macbeth's initial determination: "Here is no hesitation, no sign of any internal conflict in her"—just "one faint stirring of reluctance" when she says she would have killed Duncan herself, "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept" (2.2.12–13). But after the banqueting scene (3.4), Freud observes, "she disappears from view" until the sleepwalking in act 5 scene 1. Now "she who had seemed so remorseless seems to have been borne down by remorse."[8] Freud finds this change to need explanation:

> And now we ask ourselves what it was that broke this character which had seemed forged from the toughest metal? Is it only disillusionment—the different aspect shown by the accomplished deed—and are we to infer that even in Lady Macbeth an originally gentle and womanly nature had been worked up to a concentration and high tension which could not endure for long, or ought we to seek for signs of a deeper motivation which will make this collapse more humanly intelligible to us? It seems to me impossible to come to any decision.
>
> (pp. 319–20)

Note that Freud is *not* satisfied with the idea that Lady Macbeth had "an originally gentle and womanly nature" and collapsed from the strain of violating that nature; for him this is not the way to make her "humanly intelligible."

Freud's suggestion is that childlessness is at the back of it all. He points out that Queen Elizabeth was obliged to recognize James VI of Scotland as her heir because she, like Lady Macbeth, produced no direct heirs, and that James was the son of Mary Stuart, whose execution Elizabeth had ordered. So "the accession of James I was like a demonstration of the curse of unfruitfulness and the blessings of continuous generation. And the action of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is based on this same contrast" (p. 320). Hence the importance of Lady Macbeth's children: Macbeth is excited when he expects her to "Bring forth men-children only" (1.7.73), seeks to destroy Banquo's line (and indeed Macduff's and Siward's), and is marked as crucially disabled by Macduff's comment, "He has no children!" (4.3.216). On this premise, Freud suggests, Lady Macbeth's collapse could be explained as a reaction to her childlessness, which tells her "that it is through her own fault if her crime has been robbed of the better part of its fruits" (p. 322). The problem, of course, is that the play does not seem to allow long enough for the childlessness of the Macbeths to become an issue. In Holinshed's *Chronicles,* ten years pass, and there, as Freud thinks, failure to produce offspring might explain Macbeth's eventual transformation into a bloodthirsty tyrant. I have my own explanation for the compression of action in *Macbeth:* it is that Macbeth (like Richard III) cannot be seen to be settled as a de facto monarch because that would make his overthrow problematic. Jamesian ideology held that no established ruler should be challenged; out of respect for this, it

is made to seem that Macbeth has hardly become king—significant thanes do not swear allegiance at his coronation and his attempt to hold a state banquet is a fiasco; his removal occurs within a phase of general uncertainty and instability (see chapter 5).

Baulked by the time scheme of the childlessness explanation, Freud returns to expressions of bafflement: "We must, I think, give up any hope of penetrating the triple layer of obscurity into which the bad preservation of the text, the unknown intention of the dramatist, and the hidden purport of the legend have become condensed" (p. 323). Reluctant, still, "to dismiss a problem like that of *Macbeth* as insoluble," he suggests that Lady Macbeth and Macbeth may be two parts of a single split personality, in which case "it would of course be pointless to regard her as an independent character and seek to discover the motives for her change, without considering the Macbeth who completes her" (p. 323). The character of Lady Macbeth is explicable only when she is not a character.

Other commentators have not experienced the difficulty that Freud does, and almost universally this is because they accept the interpretation of Lady Macbeth that he rejects: that she had "an originally gentle and womanly nature" that might be "worked up to a concentration and high tension" but "could not endure for long" such violence upon itself (p. 320). This case depends upon the notion of an essential gentleness—deriving of course from womanliness—that Lady Macbeth must *really, naturally,* have instantiated. This may be violated but yet, being as fundamental as her gender, it will return to possess her imagination. In this way, virtually the same pattern is presumed for Lady Macbeth as for Desdemona: initial bold behavior is succeeded eventually by a reversion to "feminine" passivity, with an episode of nagging the husband in between. Again, because this sequence seems plausible in our cultures, it seems satisfactory as character analysis, but in fact it is a story about the supposed nature of women. Strength and determination in women, it is believed, can be developed only at a cost, and their eventual failure is at once inevitable, natural, a punishment, and a warning. Lady Macbeth is a fantasy arrangement of elements that are taken to typify the acceptable and unacceptable faces of woman, and the relations between them. And this is what strikes critics as realistic.[9]

CHARACTER, SUBJECTIVITY, AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Of course, the character as category of analysis, in the manner of A. C. Bradley, has been repudiated often enough. In the 1930s, G. Wilson

Knight set it aside because he believed that each play was "a visionary whole, close-knit in personification, atmospheric suggestion, and direct poetic-symbolism."[10] This was a symbolist-modernist poetic; Knight's *Wheel of Fire* opened with a preface by T. S. Eliot. L. C. Knights was not quite so "visionary," but his disqualification of the naive question, "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" came from a similar belief in a poetic whole of which character might be quite a trivial part.[11] Also in the 1930s, character criticism was repudiated by historical scholars like Muriel Bradbrook and Lily B. Campbell, who insisted on the dependence of the plays upon conventions of story and stagecraft current when Shakespeare was writing. Campbell argued that Shakespeare was not using modern ideas of personality, but "the prevailing ideas of [sixteenth-century] humanists in regard to passion." Bradbrook denied that the characters are transcriptions from life, arguing rather that they depend on three main conventional principles: the superhuman nature of heroes, decorum, and the theory of humors.[12] Bradbrook remarked a disjunction between "the very simple and rigid moral framework of the plays" and "the system of rigidly defined types, of stock motivation and fixed plot." This, she held, produced a "kind of double personality" (pp. 61, 67–69). However, unlike cultural materialists and many feminists, Bradbrook did not go on to observe that such conventions relate to the organization of power relations in their society.

Despite these interventions, character criticism has remained the dominant mode; it has the advantage of opening the plays, relatively, to the ways nonprofessional audiences and readers think and live. Some scholar-critics also still rely on it. Recently Barbara Everett, of Oxford University, has suggested that changes in "the Macbeths" may be understood as married couples tending to grow like each other; this not only regards them as actual people but imagines a time scale far beyond the supposed time of the play.[13] Everett has evidently observed the discontinuity that Freud remarked, but seeks to explain it by a speculation about supposed personal development. John Bayley, also at Oxford, declared in 1981 that the distinctive quality of *Macbeth* derives from the feeling that we enter the consciousness of the protagonist: "mind and consciousness take over from tragic action, creating their own intimacies with us alongside and in defiance of it."[14] As for Bradley, these are people like us (though doubtless of a more refined quality). Even what appear to be new modes of analysis may rely upon a similar assumption. Some feminist critics have believed that they should defend the fullness and reality of female char-

acters.[15] Linda Woodbridge argues that although Shakespeare and his contemporaries made "stuffy pronouncements on women" based on "the orthodox theory, . . . the lively women they created showed that their hearts were very impressed with (and often quite fond of) exuberant English Woman exactly as they found her."[16]

At another extreme, poststructuralist theory threatens to make character an altogether inappropriate category of analysis. Jonathan Goldberg calls upon critics to give up "notions of character as self-same, owned, capable of autonomy and change." He disputes that the voices of women characters are typically silenced, since *no* character has an autonomous voice anyway. We are in error when we attribute speech to individuals—"Do I speak or does something speak in me, something no smaller than the entire culture with all its multiple capacities?"[17] Goldberg develops his case especially in relation to Portia in *The Merchant of Venice,* where disguise indeed unsettles any expectations as to stability of personality. He says Portia "moves through the text, affirming the meeting of, the suspension of, difference." Her voice "plays on the unconscious of the text, reveals what is repressed when the law acts as if it were univocal" (p. 125). Catherine Belsey has argued similarly in relation to Viola in *Twelfth Night:* when she speaks as Cesario, she is "neither Viola nor Cesario, but a speaker who at this moment occupies a place which is not precisely masculine or feminine, where the notion of identity itself is disrupted to display a difference within subjectivity, and the singularity which resides in *this* difference." Drawing upon Julia Kristeva's essay "Women's Time," Belsey repudiates the liberal feminist idea of a "specifically feminine identity": "In the post-structuralist analysis subjectivity is not a single, unified presence but the point of intersection of a range of discourses, produced and re-produced as the subject occupies a series of places in the signifying system, takes on the multiplicity of meanings language offers."[18]

I agree with Goldberg and Belsey that what is recognized in our cultures as "character" in a play must be an effect of "the entire culture" and a "point of intersection of a range of discourses." However, Shakespearean plays have plainly given character critics a good deal to chew upon for a couple of centuries, and this I suspect is because they are written so as to produce, in some degree, what are interpreted (by those possessing the appropriate decoding knowledges) as character effects. This is Joel Fineman's view. He holds that in Shakespeare's sonnets the tradition of Petrarchan idealizing poetry is sensed as old-fashioned, so opening up a space for subjective introspection.

"The subject of Shakespeare's sonnets experiences himself *as* his difference from himself," Fineman asserts, and this accounts for "the deep personal interiority of the sonnets' poetic persona." From this point "a literature of deep subjective affect" is inaugurated, such that "even Shakespeare's most thinly developed dramatic characters, his Hermias and Helenas, have always been seen to participate in, and to accommodate themselves to, a theatre organised by a logic of personality—a theatre of psycho-logic as opposed to an Aristotelean theater of logical action—whose subjective intelligibility and authority have been uniformly remarked by the entire tradition of Shakespeare criticism, and not only by romantic critics of character." This, Fineman insists, is not a matter of intuiting the truth of human nature, but "a determinate literary effect," inducing "the literary effect of a subject."[19]

A persuasive account of how dramatis personae may be written so as to produce character effects is offered by William Nigel Dodd. He holds that in such dramatic texts "the audience demands and receives 'information about' something conventionally agreed to be 'happening', coincidentally with this information, here and now on the stage." The actors are, in fact, transmitting messages to the audience, but they are scripted to behave as if they are transmitting messages to each other. By thus appearing to recognize and respond to each other, they "simulate the conditions of social exchange" and hence appear as *selves.* For such exchange permits the dramatis persona "not only to reify himself (or other) as *sender/receiver,* but also to attribute *intentionality/non-intentionality* to self or other, thus creating the prerequisites for the representation of *decision* which, as Peter Szondi has shown, is the nucleus of intersubjective drama."[20] Further indicators of subjectivity might be self-reference and self-questioning (including soliloquy), indecision, lying. To be sure, such features do not amount to a modern conception of character. Rather, Dodd suggests, this semantic strategy is the means through which "authors operating in the period when the modern conception of the individual person was only just beginning to acquire its present contours (roughly from the mid-16th century on in England) were, and still are in many cases, able to communicate this sense of depth in spite of the fact that the formal psychology upon which they often drew (typically that of the 'humours') offers an inadequate account of man's inner nature (even by Renaissance standards)" (p. 146). So some early modern texts produce a sufficient impression of interaction between simulated selves to enable modern character criticism. This could be coincidence (the

signals encoded in an alien culture affording an alternative pattern of significance to modern readers); more likely it is because there is a sufficient continuity—by no means an identity—between early modern ideas of subjectivity and what later critics apprehend as character.

For, as Belsey has demonstrated, it is in the Elizabethan theater distinctively that the development of modern indicators of subjectivity may be observed. She defines the modern sense of character as "locating agency and meaning in the unified human subject" and finds it fully in place in the Restoration. But Belsey shows some modern markers of subjectivity to be present already in early modern plays. The examples she adduces are all ambivalent, never quite separating the speaking "I" that is a subject for him- or herself from the representative figures of fifteenth-century drama. Gloucester in *3 Henry VI* may seem to be "defining an emerging interiority, an independent realm of consciousness," but he is also—in Belsey's reading *rather*—"declaring a total and unified commitment to evil."[21] In my view, Belsey is slightly too insistent on banishing agency and meaning from the dramatis personae of early modern plays. To be sure, when the Duchess of Malfi says, "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (4.2.147), she is not observing one of the customary markers of modern ideas of subjectivity—namely, a distinction between public and private identities. But this is in a context where the duchess has violated the public requirements of such a personage by conceiving an inappropriate private passion (inappropriate in the view of Antonio, Bosola, and Cariola as well as Ferdinand); in such a context, "I am Duchess of Malfi still" is *reasserting* a continuity of public and private that the action thus far has drawn into question.

In another important analysis, Francis Barker also takes the question of subjectivity historically, arguing that "*Hamlet* is a contradictory, transitional text" in this respect—that it is still defining its subjects largely in terms of their place in the social plenum. For although in the speech where Hamlet says "I have that within that passes show" (1.2.85), a separation opens up between the inner reality of the subject and an inauthentic exterior, and "an interior subjectivity begins to speak," this interiority remains, Barker says, "gestural."[22] Critics have striven "to recuperate [Hamlet] to a conception of essential subjectivity *fully realised*," but "rather than the plenitude of an individual presence, the text dramatises its impossibility." At the center of the mystery of Hamlet, Barker memorably declares, there is "nothing" (pp. 36–38). But, as with Belsey, I find Barker too ready to discount interiority in these plays. It should be possible to probe further into

the relations between subjectivity and character, between traditional and poststructuralist criticism. Simon Shepherd acknowledges rather reluctantly that "the Elizabethan theatre did develop towards the portrayal of apparently more unitary subjects," but finds this to be not an even "progress," as traditional criticism has supposed.[23] He demonstrates that crucial boundaries—self and not-self, private and public, natural law and individuality—were under contest from Anglican, Machiavellian, and puritan conceptions of the self. In the first of these, people were said to be governed by reason, a natural faculty; in the second, to be moved primarily by individual self-preservation; and in the third, they might speak disruptively out of a confident possession of the word of God. Such contest obviously does not allow for any straightforward establishment of the individual as a single, unified presence, but it does point towards an enhancement of subjectivity. Shepherd quotes *De la vérité de la religion chrestienne* by Philippe de Mornay (in the translation attributed to Philip Sidney): "There is in man a double speech; the one in the mind, which they call the inward speech, which we conceive afore we utter it; and the other the sounding image thereof, which is uttered by our mouth and is termed the speech of the voice; either of both the which we perceive at every word that we intend to pronounce" (p. 79). This does not suppose a unitary "I," but it indicates a complex awareness of interiority.

What has partly moved recent commentators, in my view rightly, is awareness that character as it has been envisaged in our cultures involves essentialist humanism. This conception of "Man," basically a development of the Enlightenment, Jonathan Dollimore summarizes as "an ideology of a transhistorical human nature and an autonomous subjectivity, the second being an instantiation of the first; in short, a metaphysics of identity [that] occludes historical and social process. A critique of essentialism is about making history visible both within the subjectivity it informs, and beyond subjectivity, by, as it were, restoring individuals to history."[24] One objection to essentialist humanism is that it is anachronistic. Dollimore argues that human identity was understood in the early modern period as constituted as well as constitutive; Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Bacon anticipate a materialist perspective by suggesting that it is constituted socially, but even those who believed that Man is informed by God allow that such constitution occurs and, further, that it correlates with the requirements of the social order (which were supposed to be the requirements of God). Dollimore takes Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* (1637) as marking a crucial stage in the history of metaphysics, a point at which "the

metaphysically derivative soul gives way to the autonomous, individuated essence, the self-affirming consciousness" (p. 254). The second objection to essentialist humanism is that it imagines the self as autonomous, self-constituting, and self-sufficient, and as the uniquely valid source of meaning and truth. Thus Bradley's statement, which he intended not just as a description of a certain kind of drama but a truth about life: "The centre of tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action."[25] This effaces the mechanisms of cultural production and their implication in power structures.

None of the opponents of character criticism I have been invoking disputes altogether that dramatis personae in Shakespearean plays are written, at least some of the time, in ways that suggest that they have subjectivities. The objection is to jumping from that point to a Bradleyan or essentialist-humanist conception of character. My contention is that some Shakespearean dramatis personae are written so as to suggest, not just an intermittent, gestural, and problematic subjectity, but a continuous or developing interiority or consciousness; and that we should seek a way of talking about this that does not slide back into character criticism or essentialist humanism. This way of talking would not suppose that performances attempted an unbroken illusionistic frame; or that this continuous interiority is self-constituted and independent of the discursive practices of the culture; or that it manifests an essential unity. The key features in this redefined conception of character are two: an impression of subjectivity, interiority, or consciousness, and a sense that these maintain a sufficient continuity or development through the scenes of the play. The impression of subjectivity I have explored already, using William Dodd's model of how dialogue simulates the conditions of social exchange. A sense of continuity or development is crucial also: it involves the indicators of subjectivity appearing sufficiently connected for the audience to regard the character as a single person throughout. The evidence that many early modern people were at least beginning to experience themselves approximately and partly in such a manner is in my judgment abundant (I argue in chapter 7 that one attraction of protestantism was as a self-consciousness-producing agent). It is to be observed neither in explicit pronouncements nor especially in moments of disjunctive awareness, but in the unselfconscious texture of such day-to-day intercourse as survives for us to inspect. These people were very different from us, but not totally different.

So when critics believe they find a continuous consciousness in Desdemona and Lady Macbeth, they are responding to cues planted in the text for the initial audiences. My contention earlier in this chapter that those cues do not work out in the way traditional character critics assert—that Desdemona and Lady Macbeth seem for a while to have continuous consciousnesses but collapse back into stereotypical notions of woman—does not mean that the cues are not there or that the codes for reading them are wrong. It means that the project ran into difficulty (later in this chapter I say more of how that works). In principle, Goldberg and Belsey are right: continuous interiority in a dramatis persona can only be an effect of culture and its multiple discourses, and those can never be held to a determinate meaning. There is no stability in textuality, as poststructuralist critics have been able to show. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is some kind of free play of discourse or textuality; nor is it a reason for dispensing altogether with character—as I have redefined it. To the contrary, it is one of the major discursive formations active in these texts, and it needs to be addressed if we are to explore how subjectivities are constituted. For in our cultures, character is a major category through which we conceptualize. Jacqueline Rose writes of "that myth of linguistic cohesion and sexual identity which we must live by."[26] There is no essential woman or man, but there are ideas of women and men and their consciousnesses, and these appear in representations.

The character of Macbeth, then, is not a mysterious natural essence. Rather, he is situated at the intersection of discourses and historical forces that are competing, we might say, to fill up his subjectivity. At the start, he is acting out the dominant story—killing traitors to the current regime. This story, we hear, has the support of nature and God, but even so Duncan (judging by the revolts he is suffering) is having trouble getting it to stick. The culture represented in the play offers an alternative scenario—one that Macbeth's experience of Scottish politics, the Witches, his wife, and his own importance in the state suggest to him—namely that he might overthrow Duncan and replace him. Even so, Macbeth does not easily free himself from Duncan's story and the construction of selfhood it is supplying. In the soliloquy at the start of act 1 scene 7, he cannot find it in himself to discard the religious, natural, and social sanctions that legitimate Duncan's authority. His sense of himself is bound up with recognition of his place in the current order:

> He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
> Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
> Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
> Not cast aside so soon.
>
> (1.7.32–35)

However, Lady Macbeth says it will be easy to make the alternative story work, and she reinforces her case with an appeal to manliness. Significantly, manliness comes from within the orthodox idea of what a thane should be like—he is supposed to be bold and virile to maintain and justify his superior status. This is a good instance of how disruption derives from contradiction within the dominant: the masculine ethos that generally secures the conditions for Duncan's rule cannot altogether be controlled, and may be mobilized to facilitate his overthrow. So Macbeth finds the alternative story persuasive, and persuades himself that others will be persuaded also: "Will it not be receiv'd / . . . That they have done't?" Lady Macbeth's rejoinder is more circumspect: "Who dares receive it other . . . ?" (1.7.75–80). She does not shrink from acknowledging that compulsion may help an uncertain story to prevail.

I have given a rather schematic account, but it may serve to show how Macbeth's subjectivity is not his unique, ineluctable possession but constituted from rival stories that are current, though not equally authorized, in his society. His dissidence arises not from a confident subjectivity choosing to reorient itself—though this is the story Macbeth aspires to—but from a radically insecure subjectivity, one swaying between divergent possible selves and vulnerable to manipulation. Personal consistency, like stability of language and referent, is a myth. Nevertheless, Macbeth's subjectivity appears adequately continuous, unlike that of Lady Macbeth; though many ideological complexities may be observed in his representation, he does not have to fall silent (Othello and Desdemona form a similar contrast). Insofar as the concept of character is active in the play, Macbeth is compatible with it. But insofar as this concept is suggested in respect of Lady Macbeth, as it is initially, it cannot be carried through. In fact, she is sacrificed to keep Macbeth's story going. Correspondingly, he appears to have the fuller subjectivity (he is scripted so as to produce more of what our cultures customarily interpret as psychological density). The key to this effect seems to be that Macbeth entertains more than one discourse at a time, and interiority is projected by an audience or reader as the place where discourses intersect. He appears to choose between competing discourses, and hence to stand as a subject, independently of either. The audience observes Macbeth continuing to believe in the dominant story even after he has chosen to defy it (and as a consequence becoming the tyrant that that story says he must become). Lady Macbeth, conversely, cannot articulate complexity. Initially she is committed to the murder; when she changes, it is a sudden switch and is explored in neither soliloquy nor dialogue. Her character breaks down when it has to change.[27]

In my redefinition of character as continuous consciousness, I have not posited metaphysical coherence or "unity." For my argument, it is necessary only that the character manifest adequate continuity; as Dodd suggests, the reader will fill this in as psychological density if she or he wishes. Unity is expected in essentialist humanism, and generally it is discovered through consideration of the characters of Shakespearean plays. However, in my view this is a delusion: the effect attributed to unity derives from something else. That is why character critics only occasionally express disappointment: though full realization of unified psychological density can only be a chimera, they do not experience it like that. The reason is that the subjectivities that are admired in the plays do not actually depend upon the achievement of unity, coherence, and full presence. Character criticism depends in actuality not on unity but on superfluity—on the *thwarting* of the aspiration to realize unity in the face of material resistance. That is why "stereotypical" characters, who do have a certain unity, are thought unsatisfactory, and why when characters gain an appearance of unity through closure at the end of a text they become suddenly uninteresting. And it is why there are so many essays on the characters of Hamlet and Macbeth: they resist any convenient coherence. Francis Barker, I have noted, finds Hamlet's interiority merely "gestural," not offering "the plenitude of an individual presence," having "nothing" at the center. In my view that is not quite right: I see Hamlet producing subjectivity effects all the time in his dialogue, but some of them are provocatively discontinuous, one with another. They construct a sequence of loosely linked interiorities, not a coherent identity. That is why, as Barker observes, Hamlet tantalizes traditional critics: they cannot quite get him to add up without surplus. But this is not because there is insufficient subjectivity in the text for them to work on, but because there is too much. The text overloads the interpretive system.

What poststructuralist theory has not explained is the complacency of essentialist-humanist critics, who have generally found Shakespearean characters very rewarding to speculate about. Character criticism is not disappointed by superfluity because the condition for its practice

is an incoherence that challenges interpretation; the text produces too much meaning for a unitary account, and at that point provokes (like the introspecting self) the stabilizing intervention of interpretation. Each reading is attributed to an original unity, as essentialist ideology requires, and the occurrence of multiple and incompatible readings is attributed to the fertility of Shakespeare's genius. So interpretation disavows that which incites it. The essentialist critical project is, of course, never achieved, but that deferral allows its continuance (there must always be more readings). And that is why poststructuralist analysis can show those readings to be inadequate to texts that are compounded of divergent, incompatible, and contradictory discourses, and yet not apparently disable traditional practice (though it does tell it something it has been trying not to notice).

WHAT OLIVIA WANTS

I am going to take Olivia in *Twelfth Night* as a further test of my contention that Shakespearean plays produce dramatis personae that are like characters—to the extent that they are presented in ways that invite an expectation of an adequately continuous interiority. Once more, the expectation is eventually frustrated, Olivia falls silent, representation breaks down. Finally she proves to be not a continuous consciousness (let alone an autonomous essence), but a strand in a far wider cultural argument. Also, I shall again show how critics write as if they respect the individuality of Olivia as a character, but actually subordinate their account of her to their need to cover over the point at which the impression of continuous consciousness breaks down. Whatever her subjective preferences have seemed to be, Olivia must be discovered to want what the play's closure needs her to have; and the effect, again, is a regressive gender politics.

Important recent work on previously "unthinkable" topics, cross-dressing and homosexuality, helps us to take seriously the relationship of Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*—which is mutual, emotional, and substantially presented.[28] Stephen Orgel has argued that Shakespeare's culture was *not* morbidly fearful of male homosexuality—because this was not perceived, generally, as an impediment to heterosexuality and marriage. Hence the genial deployment of cross-dressing in these comedies. Rather, it was women and heterosexuality that generated the stronger anxiety for men—they threatened the profoundest potential disruptions to the male psyche and the social order. Louis Montrose has powerfully analyzed the idea of the Amazon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* observing that such mythology "seems

symbolically to embody and to control a collective anxiety about the power of the female not only to dominate or reject the male but to create and destroy him."[29]

But what about Olivia's passion for Cesario, the disguised Viola? In his essay "Fiction and Friction," Stephen Greenblatt evokes the "scandalous shadow story" that "the gross impropriety of a homosexual coupling" may be at issue there. However, Sebastian is set up to substitute for Cesario, and so Olivia's love was, after all, a happy swerving from nature's bias—at least, that is how Sebastian thinks of it (5.1.258).[30] But is it right to read Olivia's passion as *really* for Viola, and hence as lesbian? Olivia does not think of herself as experiencing lesbian attraction—she believes she is in love with the young man Cesario. Taking the real issue as a lesbianism of which Olivia is unaware allows critics to discount her apparent wishes: Greenblatt says: "Only by not getting what she wants has Olivia been able to get what she wants and, more important, to want what she gets" (p. 71). But what does Olivia want? A leading tactic for controlling the desires of women in our cultures is refusing to believe them when they say what they want. Nor is this specially the mode of male commentators—feminist psychoanalytic critics also have assumed that Olivia has at some level made a homosexual object choice.[31]

I shall try to take seriously what Olivia says—which is that she wants neither a lesbian relationship nor marriage with a man like Orsino. She wants to marry a man like Cesario. In exploring this, I shall be treating Olivia, initially, as if she were a person with continuous consciousness. This is surely what the text invites us to do, for it is widely agreed that Olivia's scenes with Cesario/Viola produce distinctively intricate impressions of interaction between simulated selves—giving rise to self-reference and self-questioning, soliloquy, indecision, and lying. And there is continuity:

> Give me leave, beseech you. I did send,
> After the last enchantment you did here,
> A ring in chase of you. So did I abuse
> Myself, my servant, and, I fear me, you.
> Under your hard construction must I sit,
> To force that on you in a shameful cunning
> Which you knew none of yours. What might you think?
> (3.1.113–19)

Olivia interrupts Cesario, reminds him of earlier interactions, interprets not just her own behavior and feelings but those of others, and asks for Cesario's interpretation. And Viola/Cesario remembers, un-

derstands, and responds. The scene is written so as to lead an audience to infer a continuous interiority in Olivia.

What, then, does Olivia want? She is reported as being in mourning: the Captain says she is

> A virtuous maid, the daughter of a count
> That died some twelvemonth since; then leaving her
> In the protection of his son, her brother,
> Who shortly also died; for whose dear love
> (They say) she hath abjur'd the company
> And sight of men.
>
> (1.2.36–41)

Critics have generally assumed that Olivia is preoccupied with her brother,[32] but the Captain's report introduces a hesitation ("(They say)"), and we have in the next scene a different account of her motivation from Sir Toby:

> She'll none o' the' Count; she'll not match above her degree, neither in estate, years, nor wit; I have heard her swear't.
>
> (1.3.106–8)

This, surely, is why Olivia falls for Cesario. He seems the son of a gentleman (whereas she is the daughter of a count) and is younger than she. He seems intelligent enough, but is readily dominated by her—he backs off as she advances. Olivia wants a man who is not too masculine. The deaths of her male kin have left her in the rare situation of being an independent woman,[33] and from this privileged position she has decided that she would prefer not to marry a man who will dominate her. She has not seen Orsino, notice—she dislikes the very idea of him. To Cesario she does not plead her mourning, but repeats, directly, "I cannot love him" (1.5.261, 266, 284). She pauses when she fears that Cesario may be other than he appears—not a woman, the fear that critics presume—but Orsino: "Not too fast: soft! soft! / Unless the master were the man" (1.5.297–98). Olivia wants ***the man*** without ***the master***.

Orsino's expressed attitudes towards women are quite unpleasant; they allow us to see that Olivia's intuition about him is well-founded. He says Cesario should marry a woman younger than himself because men are inconstant and abandon women when they lose their "fair flower"; therefore, he says, the best way of keeping a marriage going is for the wife to start with the advantage of relative youth, so that her physical attractions will last longer (2.4.29–39). Viola agrees—

unlike Olivia, she is thoroughly self-oppressed. Actually, Orsino himself doesn't appear very masculine, but this, I suggest, is because he is courting Olivia. Men were—indeed are—supposed to adopt a submissive, pleading posture during the period of courtship; upon marriage, conventionally, they revert to a "masculine" stance. Commentators assume that it is in Orsino's character to be "effeminate,"[34] but Linda Woodbridge recognizes it as a role: "Male characters under the influence of Petrarchanism wept, sighed, complained, exchanged their manly freedom for abject slavery to feminine whim."[35] Olivia credits Orsino with the masculine virtues customary for a man of his class—

> In voices well divulg'd, free, learn'd, and valiant,
> And in dimension, and the shape of nature,
> A gracious person.
>
> (1.5.264–66)

Indeed, he plays his subordinate, courtship role with little conviction; his inclination, evidently, is to be peremptory and domineering. His idea of love is male domination—he begins by declaring how marvelous it will be when Olivia devotes herself to him such that the "sovereign thrones" of her passions, thoughts, and emotions, and her "sweet perfections," will all be supplied and filled "with one self king." And that king will be Orsino (1.1.35–40). He despises women:

> Alas, their love may be call'd appetite,
> No motion of the liver, but the palate,
> That suffers surfeit, cloyment, and revolt.
>
> (2.4.98–100)

This is hardly ever true of women in Shakespeare's writing; even the "false" Cressida is so under duress. At the start of act 5, Orsino impatiently accosts Olivia, imperiously upbraids her and violently threatens her and Cesario (5.1.110–29). The "lover" gives way to masculine and class assertiveness. Orsino, in fact, is like Oberon in Montrose's description: he wants to "gain possession . . . of the woman's desire and obedience; he must master his own dependency upon his wife."[36] Olivia is surely right to think that Orsino is not the kind of man she would like.

Olivia's independent position makes her sole head of the household. According to Sebastian, she manages it well—it is a sign of her sanity, without which

She could not sway her house, command her followers,
Take and give back affairs and their despatch,
With such a smooth, discreet, and stable bearing
As I perceive she does.

(4.3.17–20)

Even so, Olivia has trouble with Sir Toby, who is inclined to masculine roistering; as a dependent relative, he should be subject to the discipline of the head of household, but he does not accord Olivia the authority of a man. Indeed, if Sir Toby could get her to marry Sir Andrew, he would control her through him. The Malvolio disturbance stems from the same source (all these matters are far more tightly interconnected than can be appreciated by critics who see the question of marriage in the play as individual and psychological). He is the senior male and some responsibilities of the head of household devolve upon him—in particular, Olivia tells him to turn Sir Toby out of doors (2.3.73–75). The obvious literary comparison is with *The Duchess of Malfi.* There a woman is almost free of domineering male kin and tries to take Olivia's stance. Antonio, like Malvolio, is the steward, with a similar commitment to an orderly household—he admires the way the king of France "quits first his royal palace / Of flatt'ring sycophants, of dissolute / And infamous persons."[37] The Duchess finds that Antonio has taken her cares upon him (1.1.295) and proposes to him, observing: "The misery of us that are born great— / We are forc'd to woo because none dare woo us" (1.2.363–64). It is not quite so surprising, therefore, that Malvolio imagines himself having greatness thrust upon him in the form of marriage with Olivia: the idea is produced by his structural position as well as by Maria's plot. Olivia's refusal to commit her affairs to the management of a strong male troubles the system.

The outcome is like that we have seen with Lady Macbeth and Desdemona: the woman who tries to pursue her own line is discovered trying to manipulate men and is prevented. It is a profoundly conservative scenario—and, of course, one that many critics have embraced—usually in the guise of an expectation that Olivia should make a "natural," psychologically "mature" match. This was C. L. Barber's position, in a strangely admired book—admired by heterosexuals presumably, since Barber imagines that all readers and audiences will experience as "wish-fulfilment" the idea that "playful reversal of sexual roles can renew the meaning of the normal relation."[38] Even Barber is disconcerted by the tidy way Sebastian is substituted for Cesario, but he is prepared to put up with anything so long as masculinity

triumphs: "The particular implausibility that there should be an identical man to take Viola's place with Olivia is submerged in the general, beneficent realisation that there is such a thing as a man" (p. 246). To Barber, Sebastian's "manly reflex is delightful" when he fights Sir Andrew: it shows that "Sebastian is not likely to be dominated" (p. 246). He thinks this is as it should be—Sebastian will sort out "this spoiled and dominating young heiress" (p. 245). Alternatively, we may ponder how coercive is the demand to join the heterosexual majority—characteristic as it is of most accounts of comedy.

My complaint is not that Barber is wrong about *Twelfth Night,* but that he is pleased about it; in fact he comes nearer than most commentators to seeing how precisely Olivia is frustrated. For, of course, the play depends on Sebastian not being *altogether* identical with Viola: not only is he a man, he is just such a man as Olivia does not want. Even at the point of marriage, she believes she is marrying an unmasculine man, for Sebastian backs off, like Cesario, until the last moment:

OLIVIA: Nay, come, I prithee; would thou'dst be rul'd by me!
SEBASTIAN: Madam, I will.
OLIVIA: O, say so, and so be.

(4.1.63–64)

Sebastian is hesitant because he hasn't met Olivia before; she cannot know that his compliance in such circumstances must indicate a bold—manly—kind of person. The action confirms this: Sebastian has already beaten Sir Andrew and proceeds at once to fight with and subdue Sir Toby, so his capacity to rule Olivia's household is clear enough. This is *not* what Olivia wanted. The Duke's reassurance makes it worse: "Be not amaz'd, right noble is his blood" (5.1.262). Cesario implied that he was a gentleman, but Sebastian turns out to be at least as statusful as Olivia. Furthermore (unsurprisingly, along with his fighting), Sebastian also has a complacent, conventional attitude to gender relations: "So comes it, lady, you have been mistook. / But nature to her bias drew in that" (5.1.257–58).

At this most crucial point, like Desdemona and Lady Macbeth, Olivia collapses as a character—insofar as that means the representation of a personage of continuous interiority. Just when all her desires have been systematically frustrated, she has virtually nothing to say. She has no lines at all to help us envisage the impact of it all on her subjectivity. Only a moment before, she has been typically independent—urging Cesario to assert their love and defy Orsino:

> Fear not, Cesario, take thy fortunes up,
> Be that thou know'st thou art, and then thou art
> As great as that thou fear'st.
> (5.1.146–48)

But from the appearance of Sebastian alongside Cesario, at the point where it would be most interesting to see how Olivia will respond, she says only "Most wonderful!" (5.1.223). And to the "reassurances" of Orsino and Sebastian, which I have just quoted, she says nothing whatsoever. She could and should call for an annulment—get back to her initial position—she has the money to do that. But she reenters the dialogue only to handle, with her usual efficiency, the release of Malvolio (5.1.276–314, 327–78; in this respect her character is allowed to continue). In the middle of that, while they are fetching Malvolio, she has just one comment on her marriage:

> My lord, so please you, these things further thought on,
> To think me as well a sister, as a wife,
> One day shall crown th'alliance on't, so please you,
> Here at my house, and at my proper cost.
> (5.1.315–18)

Orsino as brother is virtually as bad as Orsino as husband, of course, for he becomes a senior male kinsman alongside Sebastian, entitled to interfere in her affairs—already he is telling her what to think about her marriage. But she makes no complaint; on the contrary, she offers to pay for the weddings.

Like Desdemona and Lady Macbeth, Olivia capitulates; and the break in presentation is negotiated by silence and, all too often, the assumption that Olivia's subjection to a "real man" is only right and proper. The critical record indicates how well it has worked. But the contradiction in the ideology of gender relations has been smoothed over at the expense of Olivia as a simulated person with continuous interiority. To be sure, finding herself married to Sebastian might lead her to experience some new, complex change; she might stop being bold and independent and become timid and acquiescent. But if she is to remain a character, we need to know what she feels, how she registers it in her consciousness. Olivia cannot be allowed to say anything about any of it, because anything she could say would disrupt the play's closure. She becomes another character who is not a character. And this occurs not because Olivia cannot be allowed a lesbian relationship—which she has not contemplated—but because she cannot be allowed to have a man who will not dominate her. For heterosexual men in patriarchy, Olivia's preference may well be more

subversive than lesbianism—which mainly triggers the male heterosexual anxiety that women have a secret, intimate area closed to men. It is through the supposed demand of women that men be "masculine" that heterosexual men justify their dominance. Olivia's preference for an unmasculine man challenges this ethos.

Meanwhile—and this too confirms Orgel's argument about where the anxiety resides—Orsino gets what he wants when he marries Viola: a woman who believes in the conventional patterns of gender relations (often she uses her male disguise to insist on her underlying femininity), a woman happy to be a favored, but junior, servant. And I see no reason why Antonio should appear at the end as the defeated and melancholy outsider that critics have assumed. Leslie Fiedler, who gives Antonio more thoughtful attention than most, capitulates to the modern stereotype and declares that "hatred and distrust of self are Antonio's chief motivations."[39] To be sure, Antonio experiences the most vivid suffering in the play, when he believes that Sebastian does not care for him (3.4.356–79; 5.1.74–90). But this appears so only because of the intervention of Cesario; actually Sebastian has not forsaken his friend—he has him in mind even as he ponders Olivia's proposal (4.3.4–8). When the disguises are removed, Antonio is strongly reassured:

> SEBASTIAN: Antonio! O my dear Antonio,
> How many hours rack'd and tortur'd me,
> Since I have lost thee!
> ANTONIO: Sebastian are you?
> SEBASTIAN: Fear'st thou that, Antonio?
> (5.1.216–19)

Only Antonio has not been deluded about Sebastian; he is the man Antonio thought he was. There is no significant confusion in their relationship, and no reason why marriage to a stranger heiress should change it. If I were directing the play, I would show Antonio delighted with the way it all turns out.

BREAKING POINTS

The female characters, in the instances I have discussed, fall silent at the moments when their speech could only undermine the play's attempt at ideological coherence. We may think of such moments as manifesting a strategic deployment of perfunctory closure: like the law-and-order finale of the cops-and-robbers movie, they are conventionally required but scarcely detract from the illicit excitement of the

bulk of the text. They are the price that has to be paid for the more adventurous representation, and because an audience knows this, it may discount them. The marriages of some Shakespearean heroines may be of this kind, for some audiences at least; Olivia perhaps, and Isabella in *Measure for Measure*—she is the bold woman silenced most spectacularly when marriage is proposed. Alternatively, as Dympna Callaghan suggests, we may relate the disallowing of women's voices in these plays to Pierre Macherey's analytical model, wherein the point at which the text falls silent is recognized as the point at which its ideological project is disclosed. What may be discerned there is both necessary and necessarily absent; it may be figured as the "unconscious" of the text.[40] In this view, the gaps in character continuity I have been considering represent not only the silencing of particular female characters; they also manifest breaking points of the text, moments at which its ideological project is under special strain.

Either way, gaps in ideological coherence are in principle bound to occur. No text, literary or otherwise, can contain within its ideological project all of the potential significance that it must release in pursuance of that project. The complexity of the social formation combines with the multiaccentuality of language[41] to produce an inevitable excess of meaning, as implications that arise coherently enough at one point cannot altogether be accommodated at another. The whole tendency of ideology, as Nicos Poulantzas explains, is to reconstitute contradictions "on an imaginary level" within "a relatively coherent discourse."[42] But it is a condition of representation that such a project will incorporate the ground of its own ultimate failure. The customary notions of woman in our cultures are contradictory and indeterminate. When such a key concept is structurally unstable, it produces endless textual work. The awkward issue has continually to be revisited, reworked, rediscovered, reaffirmed. And because closure is tantalizingly elusive, texts are often to be found pushing representation to a breaking point where contradiction comes to the surface. Some commentators will then seek to help the text into coherence—in the present instances, supplying characters with feasible thoughts and motives to smooth over the difficulty. This has been the virtual raison d'être of traditional criticism. Other commentators may take the opportunity to address the ideological scope of the text—how its closures provoke collusion or questioning.

Sometimes a text will so stretch the ideological suppositions upon which it relies that even traditional critics admit a difficulty. *Measure for Measure* was dubbed a "problem play" by W. W. Lawrence and

E. M. W. Tillyard because they could not get its elements to cohere (however, the quest for coherence continued—F. R. Leavis found the ending "a consummately right and satisfying fulfilment of the essential design").[43] There is a recalcitrant factor in the presentation of Desdemona that I have not so far considered. It is usually agreed that she is a good woman—excellent, in fact, and quite unjustly maligned. But two incidents have disturbed that story. One is her genial sexual banter with Iago when Othello is in danger on the sea in act 2 scene 1; the second is her sudden thought that "Lodovico is a proper man" as she prepares for bed on her final night (4.2.35). Critics (for example, M. R. Ridley in the New Arden edition, pp. 54, 166) are troubled: is Desdemona exhibiting in these incidents a hint of the lust and treachery of which Othello—falsely . . . but then is it quite?—accuses her. What we are seeing here is a common tendency in the deployment of stereotype. The excellent Desdemona is, of course, the madonna in the customary madonna/whore binary, but the two elements in such binaries are always collapsing into each other.[44] Partly because her excellence is an unstable compound of beauty and purity, the more innocent the woman appears, the more dangerous she may actually be—that is the fear that besets Othello. Our cultures need to think of Desdemona as innocent because they fear that if she is not, she may be whorish. Where women are concerned, it is believed, there is no smoke without fire; that is why judges in rape cases assume that women invite assault upon themselves. The effect of Desdemona's strangely sexual remarks is as Lisa Jardine says: they allow "the shadow of sexual frailty" to hover over Desdemona, despite her technical innocence.[45]

Richard P. Wheeler offers a comparable argument about the innocent Isabella in *Measure for Measure.* Pondering why the Duke makes her go through the presumably traumatic parade of declaring publicly that she has had sexual intercourse with Angelo, Wheeler concludes that it makes Isabella assume traces of the whore and that thus, in the organization of the play, she becomes an acceptable bride for the Duke.[46] In *Measure for Measure,* the whorish alternative for female sexuality is defined by the prostitutes (establishing what Dympna Callaghan calls a "dynamic of the polarised feminine," within whose terms the heroine is framed).[47] In *Othello,* this role is taken by Bianca—

> A housewife that by selling her desires
> Buys herself bread and clothes: it is a creature
> That dotes on Cassio: as 'tis the strumpet's plague

> To beguile many, and be beguil'd by one.
> He, when he hears of her, cannot refrain
> From the excess of laughter.
>
> (4.1.94–97)

At first sight, Bianca is Desdemona's opposite. But here again the whore intrudes upon the madonna, for the ambiguity of "housewife" (=courtesan/manager of household affairs) links Bianca to both extremes of supposed female behavior. Furthermore, since she is condemned and mocked for her loyalty to Cassio as much as for her alleged promiscuity, where does this leave Desdemona's commitment to Othello? Edward A. Snow draws attention to an exchange shortly before the murder.[48] To Othello's injunction, "Think on thy sins," Desdemona replies, "They are loves I bear to you." Othello comments, "And for that thou diest" (5.2.40–41). In other words, Othello finds himself acknowledging that Desdemona's offense resides in her *legitimately expressed* sexuality.

Thomas Rymer thought Desdemona was being punished by and for her aberrant desire—he quotes the moral from Cinthio's story—"a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their parents' consent, they run away with Blackamoors."[49] Marrying a black man seemed a convincing instance of the danger of allowing women to do what they want. Most people, where I come from, think this nasty and racist or merely stupid—though John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of the United States, proposed a similar reading, and it has been offered in our time by Allan Bloom.[50]

To others, however, Desdemona may appear *subliminally* lustful, and this is sufficient to admit the thought that even the best of women may be whorish underneath, or anyway in potential. So with Olivia and Lady Macbeth: female desires are disruptive. Ultimately this seems to justify the general subordination of women. Nonetheless, it doesn't quite work in *Othello.* For however attractive the notion may be to some people, Desdemona cannot, reasonably, be thought to deserve her fate; and that is why the banter with Iago and thought of Lodovico have been found problematic. This, I hold, is because deployment of the feminine stereotype is taken too far here. Alongside the ideal of the innocent woman who submits and suffers, the text offers, as well, the bad woman who asks for trouble. It is this strain, I suggest, that produces the notorious dual time scheme of the play. Critics note that there seems scarcely time for Desdemona to consummate the marriage with Othello, yet he can believe she has been unfaithful with Cassio a thousand times (5.2.213). She must appear either virginal

or whorish; even her husband—especially this husband—would be a violation. But the two ideas cannot be contained within the one time scheme. In this respect also, the contradiction in the presentation of Desdemona is so blatant that it becomes implausible. The stereotype that aspires to define and control "woman" overreaches itself and, to the thoughtful, betrays itself.

As I have suggested in respect of *Hamlet,* traditional cruces in Shakespearean texts—those perplexing moments where textual insecurity seems to combine with plot and character indeterminacy—often manifest not a lack of meaning, as might be supposed, but a superfluity. Too much meaning is being offered, to the point where it cannot all be made to cohere. And this may indicate anxiety and excessive ideological work such as I have been discussing. Strain deriving from overambitious deployment of supposed female attributes is evident again in the famous question about whether Lady Macbeth has children: this is by no means trivial, given that *Macbeth* is so concerned with lineage. The play needs Lady Macbeth to have "given suck" so that she can signal her shockingly "unfeminine" determination by declaring that she would have dashed the baby's brains out if she had sworn and reneged as Macbeth has done (1.7.54–59). However, the play is not content with this: later on, Lady Macbeth has to be childless so that nature can be shown getting its own back on her. Typically, in such circumstances, criticism looks for ways of talking the text back into sense. Perhaps the line "He has no children" (4.3.216) refers to Malcolm. Or perhaps Lady Macbeth has had children and they died. But these devices do not answer to the weight of the imagery, and only the more literally minded have embraced them. The dominant reading is as Peter Stallybrass suggests: we are "asked to accept a logical contradiction for the sake of a symbolic unity: Lady Macbeth is *both* an unnatural mother *and* sterile."[51]

The other famous crux in *Macbeth* concerns why Lady Macbeth faints when their story about the grooms killing Duncan is received with incredulity (2.3.118). Is this one more sign of her fiendish presence of mind, or is it the first sign of the reemergence of her womanly nature? Within the gender assumptions that produce Lady Macbeth, the two readings are equally feasible; indeed, within the notions about character and femininity that modern critics have attempted to deploy, it is quite impossible to choose between them. But if she is a character with a continuous consciousness, she must be manifesting *either* presence of mind *or* panic. In a way, this episode might be regarded as the pivot of the play: on one side of it, Lady Macbeth is "unnaturally"

cool and collected, on the other "appropriately" conscience-stricken. But we never see how she gets from one to the other; as I have argued, she is not constructed so as to *entertain* contradictory attitudes; she can figure only as the site upon which they are displayed. The fainting/feinting incident gives us the "impossible" point at which the two contradictory features of the stereotype coincide as equally plausible. However, since they cannot coexist, but only collide, they allow an audience or reader to see, if we will, that Lady Macbeth is compounded of contradictory stereotypes—a character who is not a character.

HUMAN NATURE AND CONTEST

I have been trying to exemplify a way of reading in which speech and action in a fictional text may be attributed to characters—understood not as essential unities, but as simulated personages apparently possessing adequately continuous or developing subjectivities. But, beyond that, the presentation of the dramatis personae must be traced to a textual organization in which character is a strategy, and very likely one that will be abandoned when it interferes with other desiderata. To observe this is important, not just as a principle of literary criticism, but because it correlates with a repudiation of the assumption that reality, in plays or in the world, is adequately explained by reference to a fixed, autonomous, and self-determining core of individual being. Rather, subjectivity is itself produced, in all its complexity, within a linguistic and social structure.

But, you may ask, is there not a loss? Does not character criticism attend to individuals, and thereby sustain a generous openness to the diversity of human experience? I think not, for the counterpart of the individual is the universal; so while characters are supposed to be essentially themselves, they end up reduced to an essential human nature—to *man*. Further, when the individual and the universal come into focus, the social, the historical, and the political become blurred or fade from view. And they are the frameworks within which we might observe the operations of power and envisage alternative scope for human lives.

Key maneuvers in most character interpretation involve the surface/depths binary. Through this model, one side of an opposition is credited with the authority of profundity, while the other is relegated to the superficial. In traditional criticism, of course, the individual and the universal are profound, whereas social and political considerations are superficial. This pattern operates also in the pro-

cesses claimed for critical appreciation, with full revelation of character achieved only in the last scene, yet understood to have been deeply present all along. Typically, illusion is said to yield, slowly but surely, to the reality that was always-already there; the individual, in learning from experience to reconcile himself or herself to the world, becomes fully the person he or she always was. The ultimate profundity is alleged to appear in tragedy, where the truth about Man is said to emerge from the depths of the individual. And this usually, in modern times, is the truth of our atavistic nature—the savage Othello underlies the noble one (he may be savage and noble at once, but still the savagery seems more fundamental). This is the most disabling of essentialist myths.[52] Of course people behave in extreme ways in extreme conditions, but this does not demonstrate an underlying Man. Rather, people react diversely in diverse circumstances in diverse cultures. None of these reactions is necessarily more profound than the others; they are all ways people behave. The person who betrays his or her comrades under torture, who eats them to survive an aeroplane disaster, who kills them under intolerable stress, is no more "real" than the caring and cooperative person we see in more congenial circumstances. It is essentialist humanism, not cultural materialism, that has the narrow view of human potential.

53. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977) p. 209.

CHAPTER THREE

Epigraphs: David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (New York: New American Library, 1989), p. 63; note Hwang's locution "supposed to act." Pope, *Moral Essays* 2.1–2.

1. The argument here formed part of a paper, "*Othello* and the Politics of Character," which I delivered at the University of Santiago de Compostella in 1987; it has been published in Manuel Barbeito, ed., *In Mortal Shakespeare: Radical Readings* (Santiago: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 1989). The problem I have in mind has been observed by Lena Cowen Orlin in a paper, "Desdemona's Disposition," which she has kindly allowed me to see; it was delivered to the Shakespeare Association of America in 1987. See also Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 141; Kathleen McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. 149–52; Dympna Callaghan, *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1989), pp. 91–93, pp. 116–17; and ch. 8.

2. *Othello* is quoted from the New Arden edition, ed. M. R. Ridley (London: Methuen, 1962).

3. Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), p. 195; cf. p. 327. Marvin Rosenberg says Desdemona has been seen as "a silly fool; an indelicate wanton; loving unnaturally; a sinful daughter; a deceiver; a moral coward; too gentle; a saint; a symbol" (*The Masks of Othello* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971], p. 305).

4. Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975), 2.4.115; see Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*, 2d ed. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. 181–93.

5. Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 149.

6. Leonard Tennenhouse observes: "Shakespeare does not differ from Iago in terms of the basis upon which gender distinctions should be made" (*Power on Display* [London: Methuen, 1986], p. 126). See also Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 68; McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, p. 150.

7. Janet Adelman, " 'This Is and Is Not Cressid': The Characterisation of Cressida," in Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether, eds., *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), p. 140. However, Adelman believes that Desdemona "remains a vigorous and independent character, larger than Othello's fantasies of her" (p. 140).

8. Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-Types Met within Psycho-Analytic Work" (1916), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 318–19; reprinted in Alan Sinfield, ed., *"Macbeth": A New Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

9. E.g. A. W. Verity, ed., *Macbeth* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1902, reprinted twenty-two times by 1952), pp. xxx–xxxiii. More recently, see Juliet Dusiberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (London: Macmillan, 1975); Joan Larsen Klein, "Lady Macbeth: 'Infirm of purpose,' " in Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely, eds., *The Woman's Part* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 241–44; David Norbrook, "*Macbeth* and the Politics of Historiography," in Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker, eds., *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England* (Univ. of California Press, 1987), p. 104. However, Simon Shepherd turns the argument around, suggesting that Lady Macbeth mistakenly imagines that she must kill off the female in herself in order to be the partner Macbeth needs: her tragedy derives from this confusing of social and biological definitions of maleness (*Amazons and Warrior Women* [Brighton: Harvester, 1981], pp. 38–39). Tennenhouse avoids "ascribing a psychological cause" to the presentation of Lady Macbeth (*Power on Display*, p. 128), and Jardine regards her as frankly incredible, a "nightmare" (*Still Harping*, pp. 97–98).

10. G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930; London: Methuen, 1949), p. 11. Cf. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; London: Macmillan, 1957).

11. L. C. Knights, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" (1933), in Knights, *Explorations* (London: Chatto, 1946).

12. Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (1930; London, Methuen, 1961), p. vii; M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions in Elizabethan Tragedy* (1935; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 50, 54. On these earlier critics, see pp. 109–10, and John Drakakis, ed., *Alternative Shakespeares* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 9–12, 18–22.

13. Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet: Essays in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 103.

14. John Bayley, *Shakespeare and Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 184, 164–66.

15. See Lenz, Greene, and Neely, *Woman's Part*; Irene G. Dash, *Wooing, Wedding and Power* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981). I have addressed aspects of this approach in chapter 2.

16. Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance*, p. 327.

17. Jonathan Goldberg, "Shakespearean Inscriptions: The Voicing of Power," in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, eds., *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 118–19.

18. Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies," in Drakakis, ed., *Alternative Shakespeares*, pp. 187–88; Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *Signs* 7 (1981): 13–35.

19. Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), pp. 25, 79–80, 82; see also pp. 42–43.

20. William Nigel Dodd, "Metalanguage and Character in Drama," *Lingua e Stile* 14 (1979): 135–50, pp. 136, 143–44; alluding to Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1956),

ch. 1. Dodd also discusses "out of character" speech to the audience, and ambiguous instances.

21. Belsey, *Subject of Tragedy*, p. 38 and ch. 2, with reference to Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, ed. Andrew S. Cairncross (London: Methuen, 1964), 5.6.80–91.

22. Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 31, 35–38. I discuss *Hamlet* partly in this light in chapter 9 below.

23. Simon Shepherd, *Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 81, and ch. 3.

24. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, 2d ed., p. xxxii; and see ch. 10.

25. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 7.

26. Jacqueline Rose, "Sexuality in the Reading of Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*," in Drakakis, ed., *Alternative Shakespeares*, p. 102.

27. Cf. Belsey, *Subject of Tragedy*, pp. 47, 51; McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, p. 136 and ch. 6. For another argument about the realism of Shakespeare's characters, see A. D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), pp. 80–100, 163–81. Nuttall allows my position when he acknowledges that Jack the Giant Killer is not real like Falstaff (p. 100), but I think he would disagree with me on how far Shakespearean characters are like Jack the Giant Killer.

28. *Twelfth Night*, New Arden ed., 2.1; 3.3; 3.4.356–79; 5.1.74–90, 216–26. Molly M. Mahood concludes her introduction to the New Penguin edition of the play (Harmondsworth, 1968) with the suggestion that Antonio's is "the true voice of feeling" and perhaps a "rare revelation" of Shakespeare's "personal experience" (p. 39).

29. Orgel, "Nobody's Perfect: Or, Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (1989): 7–29; Louis Adrian Montrose, " 'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture," in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *Representing the English Renaissance*" (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), p. 36.

30. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 67–68.

31. E.g., Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), pp. 207–9. According to Kahn, the play ends with "men and women truly knowing themselves through choosing and loving the right mate" (p. 211). However, Olivia is appreciated as the principal threat to gender hierarchy in the play by Jean Howard, "Crossdressing, the Theater and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (1988): 418–40. For the view that Viola is no real challenge, see also Clara Clairborne Park, "As We Like It: How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular," in Lenz, Greene, and Neely, *Woman's Part*, p. 108 et passim.

32. E.g., Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 47–48.

33. See Jardine, *Still Harping*, pp. 78–80, 84–88, on some of the circumstances in which women might inherit and achieve some independence. I disagree with Stephen Greenblatt's expectation that courtship should be facilitated by the absence of males with whom Orsino would otherwise negotiate; the play shows the opposite—that Orsino's courtship suffers from the absence of a sympathetic male to dominate Olivia on his behalf (*Shakespearean Negotiations*, pp. 68–69). Compare Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, who is controlled by her father even after his death.

34. E.g. Richard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), p. 102; Howard, "Crossdressing," p. 432.

35. Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance*, p. 238. See also Tennenhouse, *Power on Display*, pp. 63–68.

36. Montrose, " 'Shaping Fantasies,' " p. 41.

37. John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *The Selected Plays of John Webster* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 1.1.7–9.

38. C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 244–45. Psychoanalytic criticism is likely to be reactionary here. For instance: "*Twelfth Night* traces the evolution of sexuality as related to identity, from the playful and unconscious toyings of youthful courtship, through a period of sexual confusion, to a final thriving in which swagger is left behind and men and women truly know themselves through choosing and loving the right mate"—so Kahn, *Man's Estate*, pp. 210–11.

39. Leslie Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (St Albans, Herts.: Paladin, 1974), pp. 76–79.

40. Callaghan, *Woman and Gender*, pp. 74–75 and ch. 5; see Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978); McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, p. 154.

41. See V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York and London: Seminar Press, 1973), pp. 17–24, 95–106.

42. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. Timothy O'Hagan (London: New Left Books, 1973), p. 207.

43. See William Witherle Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (1931; New York: Ungar, 1960); E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (London: Chatto, 1950); F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 169. The ending, Leavis continues, is "marvellously adroit, with an adroitness that expresses, and derives from, the poet's sure human insight and his fineness of ethical and poetic sensibility."

44. On the interinvolvement of the elements in a binary stereotype, see Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 18–36, p. 34; and Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, pp. 116–21.

45. Jardine, *Still Harping*, pp. 75, 119–20, 184–85. See Orlin, "Desdemona's Disposition"; McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, pp. 150–51.

46. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies*, pp. 128–30; see *Measure for Measure*, ed. J. W. Lever (London: Methuen, 1965), 5.1.95–104. Steven Mullaney argues that having to speak *as* Mariana helps Isabella internalize Angelo's view of her (*The Place of the Stage* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988], pp. 108–11).

47. Callaghan, *Woman and Gender*, p. 67.

48. Edward A. Snow, "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*," *English Literary Renaissance* 10 (1980): 384–412.

49. Quoted by Karen Newman, "Femininity and Monstrosity in *Othello*," in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, eds., *Shakespeare Reproduced* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 152.

50. On Adams, see Alfred Van Rensselaer Westfall, *American Shakespearean Criticism, 1607–1865* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1939), pp. 224–26; and see Allan Bloom, *Shakespeare's Politics* (1964; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), ch. 3. An alternative, of course, is to deny that Othello is really black: so Henry N. Hudson, replying to Adams (see Westfall, pp. 252–53), and M. R. Ridley in the introduction to the New Arden edition of *Othello*, pp. l–liv.

51. Peter Stallybrass, "*Macbeth* and Witchcraft," in John Russell Brown, ed., *Focus on "Macbeth"* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 198. According to the historians Boece and Buchanan, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth did have a son and he was killed by Macduff, David Norbrook points out ("*Macbeth* and the Politics of Historiography," p. 89).

52. See Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, pp. 116–21; and on Man, Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, 2d ed. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), chs. 10, 16.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder, 1909), 19: 118–19.

2. *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 33.

3. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 209.

4. Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion," *Glyph* 8 (1981): 40–61, p. 53.

5. Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 177, 116. The criticism of Greenblatt's "totalistic urge" is in Jonathan Goldberg, "The Politics of Renaissance Literature: A Review Essay," *English Literary History* 49 (1982): 514–42.

6. Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets," p. 57; Goldberg, *James I*, p. 154.

7. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. Timothy O'Hagan (London: New Left Books, 1975), pp. 161–62; see also pp. 168–72.

8. Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolute State* (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 142.

9. V. G. Kiernan, "State and Nation in Western Europe," *Past and Present* 31 (1965): 20–38, p. 33.

10. W. T. MacCaffrey, "England: The Crown and the New Aristocracy, 1540–1600," *Past and Present* 30 (1965): 52–64, p. 64.

11. Ernest William Talbert, *The Problem of Order* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1962), p. 28.

12. See Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).