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**Unifying Power and the Subversive Force of
Heteroglossia in *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*,
A New Historicist Reading.**

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Introduction

Literary criticism in the twentieth century developed an interest in studying the literary work by placing it in the historical period of its production, which was almost absent from the preceding critical practices. Although historical criticism is not an invention of the twentieth century, the large claims made for it undoubtedly are. Modernist poetic practice spurred on modernist critics to give full rein to their intense engagement with the poet's imagination, and they could not do so without an understanding of the time-bound language and concepts with which he shaped his art. But this is the application of history at its most minimal, whereas for many twentieth century critics history is the indispensable component of their critical practice. "The systematic application of historical findings to the interpretation of secular literature," writes Viswanathan, "is a characteristic twentieth-century development" (7).

This development has been particularly intense in twentieth century Shakespeare criticism. Of course, this historical awareness applied in the study of the literary work has not always concentrated on the same area and for the same purposes. In the case of Shakespeare much of the historical research of the 1920s and 1930s focused on Shakespeare's stage conventions, audiences, and theater. The argument was that to think like the average Elizabethan playgoer would solve most interpretive problems. This move was influential and led to attempts by directors to stage Shakespeare in the light of a growing understanding of the Elizabethan stage conventions and conditions.

However, Elizabethan stage conditions and conventions obviously do not exhaust the possibilities for historical research though they remain a favorite area for researchers of a more practical bend. For most early twentieth-century historical

critics, however, the entire Elizabethan world was their stage and expeditions to it promised them golden returns in their pursuit of Shakespeare's meaning.

As the century wore on, twentieth-century Shakespeare criticism widened its historical horizons. Such areas as the social and economic conditions of Shakespeare's time, its intellectual and cultural climates, its religious beliefs, its literary and dramatic theories became the staple for critics attempting to celebrate Shakespeare's greatness. Critics like Robertson, Stoll, Schucking, Theodore Spencer, Campbell, and Tillyard used historical evidence from a variety of intellectual movements for a better understanding of Shakespeare's works.

Of course, this kind of research into the ideas of Shakespeare's time received a lot of criticism from later critics, especially materialist critics of late 1970's onward, for its confinement of Shakespeare's plays within official ideas of the time. According to many recent critics, this confinement of Shakespeare's plays by the ideas of the time in the twentieth century can be blamed on Tillyard, the author of the now infamous *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943) and the influential book he published a year after it, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944).

The Elizabethan World Picture is an elaboration of what Tillyard thinks the average Elizabethan intellectual believed in, knowingly or not; beliefs, that is, "which were quite taken for granted by the ordinary educated Elizabethan" (1943, vii), those that "would have been present to the mind of every educated man in an Elizabethan audience" (1943, 72-3). In his book on Shakespeare's history plays Tillyard's view by and large is that Shakespeare followed the chief historiographers of the Tudor period

who justified the Tudor dynasty's claim to the throne by an elaborate defense. Their careful construction of what has become to be known as the 'Tudor myth' is the pattern followed by Shakespeare in his history plays.

For the critics of Tillyard's generation language was not a problem. They considered themselves objective, so by reading Shakespeare 'Elizabethanly', by thinking like the average Elizabethan theater-goers one could yield authentic knowledge of the past which was not tainted by the historical distance of the critic. What these old historicists revealed was the truth; it was true because it was historical. But historical research in the 1960s and 1970s – sometime before the work of the new historicists – did not have any such snug illusions about prying open the hidden meaning of Shakespeare by restoring the historical past. The new upsurge of interest in Shakespeare from a historical point of view in the 1980s and 1990s – the new historicism – has once again started to criticize and annihilate the work of the so-called old historicists of Tillyard's generation. In *Political Shakespeare* (1985), the book that contributed immensely to launch cultural materialism and new historicism, Dollimore writes:

Tillyard's world picture, to the extent that it did still exist, was not shared by all; it was an ideological legitimation of an existing social order, one rendered the more necessary by the apparent instability, actual and imagined, of that order. (5)

The 1980s ushered in a historical criticism that by and large was a left wing, radical,

and intensely committed to an instrumental view of literary criticism. Armstrong dubs the Shakespeare criticism of these years in England ‘Thatcher’s Shakespeare’ and records the books that began the onslaught: Dollimore’s *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*(1984), his and Alan Sinfield’s *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*(1985), Drakakis’s collection of essays *Alternative Shakespeare*(1985) and Holderness’s *The Shakespeare Myth*(1988), Hawkes’s *That Shakespearian Rag*(1986), and Eaglton’s *William Shakespeare*(1986). This was oppositional criticism of a particular biased kind in which history became synonymous with studies of power and ideology.

This criticism views the world of Shakespeare’s plays from the vantage point of the dispossessed and marginalized. Feminism, new historicism (in the United States), Marxism, and cultural materialism (in the United Kingdom) vie with each other in the representation of Shakespeare’s history plays in terms not so much of the major royal figures that used to be the plays’ central characters but in terms of the commons who opposed them or who suffered under them. Howard and Rackin believe that “[t]he predicaments faced by Shakespeare’s kings, and the steps they take to confront them, now appear to be shaped as much by the predicaments of the ordinary men in Shakespeare’s audience as they were by the historical records that Shakespeare found in his chronicle sources” (186-7). Cohen writes: “The vast majority of recent political writing on Shakespeare has sided with the victims of state power, class hierarchy, patriarchy, racism, and imperialism, a partisanship, it is worth assessing, not only compatible with but also necessary to a commitment to objectivity in

scholarship”(20). It is in the light of these developments in the application of historical understanding to the critical analysis of the literary work, especially over the past twenty five years or so – that is, since the emergence of new historicism – that the present study is implemented. But what are the driving principles that have enabled this historical scholarship to distance itself from earlier studies of literature from a historical point of view?

Chapter One

New Historicism of Greenblatt

I. New Historicism: The Beginnings

In 1982 Stephen Greenblatt edited an important collection of essays on English Renaissance literature and in the preface claimed that “many of the present essays give voice, I think, to what we may call the new historicism” (2). This is widely acknowledged to be the first appearance of the rubric as the name of the critical movement associated with Greenblatt himself, who had two years earlier drawn attention to his critical practice by writing his very influential book in the field of Renaissance studies *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*¹. But with regard to the name new historicism Greenblatt’s attitude is complex. In “Towards a Poetics of Culture” (1989), one of few attempts by Greenblatt to reflect on the theoretical position of his work, he says, in a gesture tinged with *sprezzatura*, that he did not coin it deliberately and that its success “makes me quite giddy with amazement” (1). While it is in this essay that he expresses his preference for ‘cultural poetics’ as the term used to identify his critical practice, he has not stopped claiming for himself the institutionalized name new historicism as, for instance, he explicitly used it in the book he co-authored with Gallagher in 2000 *Practicing New Historicism*. But no matter what term he prefers, it is new historicism with which his style of literary analysis is extensively labeled.

The specification of a particular time and place and the widespread association of new historicism with Greenblatt as the leading proponent and practitioner, however true, might give the wrong impression that new historicism burst into existence by the inspiration of a single individual, while in fact it was shaped, by its own definition, by

the conjunction of a number of prior discourses about literature and language. From its outset new historicism positioned itself in opposition to the major critical movements of the twentieth century while at the same time incorporating many of their insights and analytical tools into its own project. In the introduction to *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* Greenblatt sets new historicism “apart from both the dominant historical scholarship of the past and the formalist criticism that partially displaced this scholarship in the decades after World War Two” (2253). New historicism, Greenblatt expounds, is “less concerned to establish the organic unity of literary works and more open to such works as fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for the jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses” (2254). As a mode of materialist criticism, new historicism challenges the essentialist conception of art which sees the literary work as a passive embodiment of transhistorical truth and, instead, seeks to understand the text as a historical process. But unlike early materialist criticism, in writers like Lukács, which saw literary texts as reflections of the historical and material conditions in which they were produced, for new historicism a dialectical relationship exists between the text and its context. The text is not a simple expression of an outside real economic base, but is rather a dynamic element capable of exerting its own influence back onto the historical context of which it is itself a part². While in the 1980s it challenged the dominance of deconstruction and the legacy of New Criticism in the United States, new historicism did not totally do away with the analytical tools that these disciplines can provide to serve the purposes of new historicism. Although by studying the literary work in the historical period of its production it reintroduced the historical dimension to literary

studies, it did not embrace the old historicist reduction of the text as merely a reflection of its monological historical context. The strands of theory that fused to create new historicism were not limited to literary studies but included influential developments in the fields of anthropology, history, ethnography, and other disciplines and sciences too. Influences range from Foucault to Geertz's notion of 'thick description' and the 'metahistory' of White, as well as strands within Western Marxism (Macey, 270). In *Practicing New Historicism* Greenblatt and Gallagher track this interdisciplinary attribute of new historicism to the early discussions conducted between them and scholars from other disciplines both prior to the establishment of *Representations* and later inside its editorial board. The discussions provided the opportunity for the exchange and adoption of arguments and tools discarded by other disciplines which proved useful for the purposes of literary criticism. Here they also acknowledge their going back to those analytical tools, such as those used by New Critics, that they had hastily renounced (3). Although these discussions led to the establishment of *Representations* as the structure within which these scholars could collaborate it never provided the space for the emergence of a theoretical doctrine in the form of an editorial statement. What kept these scholars together was not a shared theoretical ground but their common will to cling onto their idiosyncratic practices.

II. A Practice Not a Doctrine

One of the characterizing features of new historicism which, ironically, renders any categorization difficult is the absence of any concerted theoretical ground that informs even the practice of its avowed practitioners. New Historicism can hardly be defined as a critical movement with an underlying theoretical manifesto or doctrine that brings together its practitioners into a strong common practice. In fact foremost new historicists themselves have been deliberately reticent about the theoretical position of their practice and have rarely attempted to expound it by providing polemical instructions to an identifiable school of criticism. Fineman, one of these critics himself, has spoken of new historicism's "programmatic refusal to specify a methodological program for itself—its characteristic air of reporting, haplessly, the discoveries it happened serendipitously to stumble upon in the course of undirected, idle rambles through the historical archive" (52). To avoid rigidifying new historicism into a prescriptive 'doctrine', Greenblatt (1989) identified it, in one of the essays in which he comes close to abstract theory, as "a practice rather than a doctrine, since as far as I can tell (and I should be the one to know) it's no doctrine at all" (1). Heterogeneity across the continuum of new historicism, however, and the reluctance to yield any definition of it do not rule out the possibility of spotting certain constants, assumptions, and analytical devices that binds its practitioners. Veenser, in his key collection of essays on new historicism, was first to itemize these assumptions as follows:

1. that every expressive act is embodied in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary “texts” circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. ..., that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.

(xi)

The attraction of this listing of characteristics, as general as these are, lies in its reduction of new historicism’s diversity and complexity and unfortunately many reviewers have liked it for exactly that reason. To avoid falling prey to what new historicism has invariably tried to steer clear of by problematizing the grand narratives of history in its determination to do justice to the particular example one, then, would be better off turning the look onto the particular critic and his practice rather than trying to formulate any overarching definition of an otherwise diverse critical ‘school’.

This study focuses its attention on and attempts to tap into the critical practice of Greenblatt himself, who is standing at the forefront of a variety of critics who either explicitly attach themselves to or, despite their noticeable affinities, decide to dissociate themselves from new historicism. It should be noted, of course, that while a close reading of Greenblatt’s works can lead one to a better understanding of other

Part I, Chapter 1; Part II, Chapters 4-5 Entire Entire "The Future is Kid Stuff" The Fact of Blackness On National Culture Preface. Las Meninas. 75-81, 131-148 25.Â The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Mirror Stage. The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious The Unconscious and Repetition. 75-81 412-444. 17-64.