

## "Marx the Shakespearian | Shakespeare the Marxist" by Gabriel Egan

Marxist cultural theory underlies much teaching in university departments of literature and has played a crucial role in the development of recent theoretical approaches to Shakespeare. Feminism, New Historicism, cultural materialism, postcolonial theory, and queer theory draw upon Marx's ideas about cultural production, and have a marked affinity with Renaissance studies. There is, however, little open literary debate of Marx's ideas and in the popular imagination they are no more than irrelevant utopianism. The latest book in Routledge's Accents on Shakespeare series, Marxist Shakespeares, is a collection of essays which should help bring Marx back into discussions of literature and it is edited by Jean Howard (Columbia University and president of the Shakespeare Association of America, 1999-2000), and Scott Cutler Shershow (Miami University, Oxford Ohio). Admitting the subject's limitations, Howard and Shershow want to "to push the boundaries of Marxist thought by ongoing engagement with feminism, cultural studies, and non-Marxist forms of historicism" (p. 3) in order to save it from dismissal as a grand narrative toward which the knowing postmodern should remain, as Jean-François Lyotard put it, incredulous.

For students of literature Marx's most important work is on the relationship between creativity and economic production, leading to the assertion that "consciousness arises out of social being" (Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy). Marx's model of a society's base (the way production is organized) and superstructure (the corresponding mental systems including jurisprudence, education, and art) seems reductive if the superstructure is thought merely to serve the needs of the base. But Marx repeatedly stressed that thought escapes the confines of material circumstance and the essence of his determinism was the notion that language, a social construct, forms consciousness as well as expressing it. Perceived phenomena, Marx recognized, are categorized according to arbitrary, and regionally distinct, arrangements, so that while in one country the rainbow may be seen as having 7 colours and the changing weather patterns as forming 4 seasons, in another country people might see 9 colours and only 2 seasons. Literature undergraduates learn this from Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, but might not fully grasp its philosophical consequences. Marx believed that human consciousness inevitably undertook self-examination in which it was both subject and object, and that this was an engine of intellectual progression because self-knowledge changes the subject, and hence the object, of the examination. Analysis of ourselves and our social relations generates new ideas for which existing language may be ill-equipped, and in developing new terminologies the raw material for yet newer thoughts is created.

Most accessible and exciting of the essays in Howard and Shershow's collection is Kiernan Ryan's "Measure for Measure: Marxism before Marx" which criticizes the historicism currently fashionable in Shakespeare studies for concentrating too much on the original cultural and physical contexts; no doubt rebuilding a open-air amphitheatre counts here. Doggedly looking backward we easily miss the drama's own looking forward to better futures. A play's audience might perceive more clearly than the protagonists how the depicted society perpetuates the systems of coercion its members are enduring, and in this Shakespeare was a proto-Marxist. Balancing this anticipation of Marx is Marx's debt to Shakespeare. Revolutionary socialism,

seemingly defeated in Louis Bonaparte's coup, nonetheless is "still journeying through purgatory" and when it resurfaces Europe will cry "Well grubbed, old mole!" (18th Brumaire, quoted p. 23). The Communist Manifesto begins with a haunting, to describe the insubstantiality of social relations engendered by the perpetual bourgeois revolutionizing of the instruments of production Marx used "All that is solid melts into air" . In "An impure history of ghosts: Derrida, Marx, Shakespeare", Richard Halpern explores Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx as a sustained encounter with Marxism which is also "a significant, extended meditation on Hamlet" (p. 31)

In the theatre, Marx's famous inheritors were G. B. Shaw and Bertolt Brecht. In Around the Globe 15 (Autumn 2000) Martin Wiggins examined Shaw's ambivalent response to Shakespeare, but about the working class Shaw was straightforward: "Hamlet's experiences simply could not have happened to a plumber. A poor man is useful on the stage only as a blind man is: to excite sympathy" (Preface to The Dark Lady of the Sonnets). In seeing the Elizabethan mindset as essentially closed to ideas whose time had not come, Shaw displayed a limited grasp of Marx's radical ideas about the relationship between art and economic production. Shaw's works are notably conservative in their dramatic form--adopting with minor modifications the conventions of his time--while radical in their content. By contrast, Brecht anticipated Mikhail Bakhtin's dictum that "Form serves as a necessary bridge to new, still unknown content" (quoted by Ryan, p. 229) and he valued original Elizabethan performance conditions for their useful awkwardness which made apparent the means of representation. Brecht saw conventions of artistic representations as necessarily part of the superstructure and hence at least partly oriented to the needs of the current economic system, and his ideas about the theatre (especially verfremdungseffekt, the alienation effect) share features of the Russian Formalists' view of literature as whatever does violence to everyday language in order to make it newly unfamiliar. Contemplative self-awareness of the event as a construct, Brecht's prescribed mode of play-watching, is almost unavoidable for audience members bathed in natural daylight watching each other watching the play in the reconstructed Globe. Of that at least Brecht would have approved.

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