Issues in Review

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Subjectivity, Theory, and Early Modern Drama

Introduction

Over the past two decades, various schools of poststructuralist theory and criticism, including various branches of feminism, new historicism, cultural materialism, and psychoanalysis, have brought complex questions to bear on the conceptualization and representation of subjectivity in the early modern theatre, guiding out thinking about the term as a historically and discursively contingent, performative construct. In 1985 Catherine Belsey, in *The Subject of Tragedy*, identified two competing views of the human subject as operative in early modern European culture and theatrical practices: one, the medieval idea of the discontinuous, fragmented self; the other, what Belsey characterized as an incipient humanist notion of the stable, self-reflexive subject, a conceptualization that, she argued, would not be fully realized until the Enlightenment.¹ More recently, literary critics and historians of the early modern period have demonstrated that the notion of the unified, self-reflexive subject was already in wide circulation during the late sixteenth century. As Sara Deats observes, antithetical views of subjectivity coexisted at this time amid competing claims about the ways in which the human subject attains knowledge, giving rise to ‘an order of subjectivity that is recognizably modern’.² Based in large part on the writings of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and other late-twentieth century theorists, early modern subjectivities have come to be considered as speculative and performative cultural constructs.³ Within this broad historical and semantic framework, subject performance in the early
modern theatre has been, and continues to be, widely theorized as perpetually created and redefined in complex relation to sociopolitical and discursive pressures.

Yet the poststructuralist paradigm of the universally discontinuous subject has proved problematic in considerations of ‘subjects’ who have been marginalized or excluded from official culture, whether premodern or postmodern. Judith Butler herself, in *Bodies that Matter*, cautioned against the uncritical articulation of a theory that promotes non-essentialist subjectivities and identifications without an attendant exploration of the ideologies of exclusion that initially gave rise to those structures. In the late 1980s in renaissance studies, scholars of early modern drama began to re-examine the new theoretical assumptions and methodologies that were informing our understanding of early modern subject formation and representation, with some critics concluding that one result had been the reinforcement of the universality of the white male heterosexual subject. In his influential essay, ‘Political Criticism of Shakespeare’, Walter Cohen, for example, critiqued the new historicism’s understanding of gender in the context of the body and structures of power ‘more than in relation to women’. The elision, he argued, denied women an identification as subjects: women ‘can be victims or objects, but it is not . . . their experience that matters’. In an equally provocative analysis of ‘the new theoretical discourses’, Carol Thomas Neely asserted that, despite what projects like new historicism, neo-Marxism, and cultural materialism seem to have in common with feminist criticism, ‘their effect . . . has been to oppress women, repress sexuality, and subordinate gender, ‘ultimately ‘re-producing patriarchy’. As a result of these and related interrogations, scholars interested in early modern subjectivities, including the corollaries of race, gender, and sexuality, increasingly recognized that theoretical and historical investigations needed to take into fuller account the methodologies, discourses, and ideologies that distinguish early modern cultures, and their connection to what Mary Beth Rose has called ‘the otherness of the past’. Critical explorations of subject representation and performance on the English renaissance stage are continuing to provide valuable correctives to postmodern paradigms. Katharine Eisaman Maus, in *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, has challenged us to rethink the theoretical commonplace that has defined the concept of ‘self’ manifested in renaissance discourses as epistemologically ‘void’; in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, she argues, subjectivity is not an anachronistic category but a category (epistemological, psychological, and political) of presence rooted in the distinction between inwardness/interiority and outward or ‘falsifiable’
identity. In ‘Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture’, Louis Montrose has argued that in the early modern period the process of subjectification not only subjects individuals to cultural imperatives, but also confers agency and subjectivity, making individuals ‘loci of consciousness and initiators of action’. And in her important studies of subjectivity, desire, and sexuality as represented in the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, Valerie Traub has urged that critical assessments of the plays address more fully the ‘material and subjective experience’ that led early modern individuals (actual and imaginary) to resist dominant ideological imperatives; one way of doing so, she suggests, is by approaching gender, desire, and sexuality as ‘experienced not only in the contact between bodies, and between bodies and institutions, but through the experience of subjective need, want, anxiety and fulfilment’. Since the 1990s revisionist scholarship on early modern subjectivities has also witnessed a growing interest in postcolonial theoretical perspectives. In her groundbreaking essay ‘The Color of Patriarchy’, for example, in the 1994 anthology *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, Ania Loomba notes that a meeting point of ‘Renaissance and postcolonial studies’ has been their ‘common interest in marginalized peoples of different sorts, and in their disparate attempts to theorize and recover subaltern resistance (or agency)’ in the context of their ‘relation to power’; at the same time, however, she cautions that ‘the agency of the marginalized subject is obscured when that subject is theorized as discontinuous, or as merely “the site” for the intersection of various discourses’.

The three short essays that follow are offered in the spirit of the ongoing debate about subjectivity as a signifier of identification in the drama of early modern England. Each essay provides a different perspective on the concept, urging at the same time the need for a continuous revaluation of the theoretical questions and modes of analyses that are informing the discourse. With reference to Shakespeare’s *Othello*, I note that while political/postcolonial readings of the play’s representation of the racialized subject have taught us important ways of re-reading renaissance texts, a psychoanalytic inquiry elucidates further the early modern theatre’s complicity in the colonialist articulation of Otherness. Theodora Jankowski, whose scholarship on queer theory and its applications to renaissance literary and dramatic texts has added important dimensions to our understanding of early modern cultural production, here explores Dekker’s *Honest Whore* plays to illustrate how the alliance of queer theory with feminist and Marxist/cultural-materialist theory and criticism provides new insights into the representation of early modern subjectivities, in particular radical subject positions occupied by women. In
his post-Derridean meditation on subject performance in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Bryan Reynolds expands upon his theory of ‘transversal poetics’ (which he has been developing over the past ten years) with an ‘investigative-expansive’ mode of analysis that he calls ‘fugitive explorations’, a politically and aesthetically empowering mode of critical analysis designed to challenge the disempowerment of subjects that, he argues, many forms of poststructuralist discourse have promoted. Although the three essays differ substantially in their theoretical and critical apparatus, they share two related claims: 1) the need for contemporary literary theory and criticism to attend more expansively to ideologies (both premodern and postmodern) of power, and to how those ideologies frame our discourse; and 2) the absolute need, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, for a theoretical methodology that is politically engaged and progressive.

Viviana Comensoli

**Identifying Othello: Race and the Colonial (non)Subject**

I offer the following brief inquiry into Shakespeare’s *Othello* as a preamble to a longer study of the insights that contemporary psychoanalytic theory can bring to political/postcolonial questions surrounding early modern conceptualizations of subjectivity and difference. My reading of Othello’s status as ‘(non)subject’ builds on the widely accepted view of the play as upholding the Subject/Other dichotomy that underwrites western epistemologies of difference.13 Bringing to this view a contemporary psychoanalytic lens clarifies the play’s implication in colonialist ideology. While the play coheres, on one hand, with the traditional Subject/Other split, a psychoanalytic reading reveals how the play ultimately excludes Othello from the Self/Other dynamic that in colonial cultures makes subjectivity possible. The question that underwrites my analysis is how, in the context of the early colonialist culture in which the English renaissance theatre operated, can characters identified as Other be represented as, in Maus’s terms, having a Self, or, in Montrose’s terms, as having a ‘consciousness’ and the capability for action?

According to a now widely accepted new-theoretical reading of the play, before Othello’s capitulation to Iago’s provocations, Othello, the familiar Moor of Venice, tragically deludes himself into believing that, despite his African ancestry, he is not an alien in the Venetian social hierarchy. Instead, Othello’s Otherness is masked by his supreme confidence and ability as a