Introduction:
Tradition and Subversion

by Michele Marrapodi

In a famous book, discussing the transition from Middle Ages to Renaissance, the old historicist critic E. M. W. Tillyard maintained long ago that the idea of the world picture inherited by the Elizabethans "was that of an ordered universe arranged in a fixed system of hierarchies but modified by man's sin and the hope of his redemption".[1] The correlative chain of hierarchical correspondences derived from this philosophical reason and invested the social, political, and religious spheres as a whole. What Arthur Lovejoy named "the great chain of being" reflected the Elizabethans' belief in a cosmic order and, conversely, their profound concern for any form of social, political, or religious transgression.[2] The fear, anxiety, or threat of the return to the primeval chaos is clearly expressed in Ulysses' much quoted speech at the beginning of *Troilus and Cressida*:

> The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
> Observe degree, priority, and place,
> Infixture, course, proportion, season, form,
> Office and custom, in all line of order.
> And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
> In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
> Amidst the other, whose med'cinable eye
> Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil
> And posts like the commandment of a king,
> Sans check, to good and bad. But when the planets
> In evil mixture to disorder wander,

[1] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973; First ed., 1943), p. 3.

[2] A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964; First ed. 1936).

What plagues and what portents, what mutiny?
What raging of the sea, shaking of earth?
Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixture. O when degree is shaked,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick.[3]

(1.3.85-103)

The firm belief in a universal order or 'world picture' established the principle of fixed hierarchical roles in all human activity, mirroring a cosmic harmony expressed in musical terms. In his long poem, *Orchestra, A Poem of Dancing* (1596), Sir John Davies equates Queen Elizabeth's social and political stability to the natural order, paralleling the cosmic dance and music of the Ptolemaic universe. "The introduction of Queen Elizabeth and her court" – Tillyard observed – "is not mere flattery; it shows the cosmic dance reproduced in the body politic, thus completing the series of dances in macrocosm body politic and microcosm".[4] In Shakespeare's *Pericles*, the eponymous hero relies on this same credence as he compares the excess of joy for the miraculous recognition of his daughter Marina to the celestial "music of the spheres" (Sc. 21, 215), the cosmic harmony not audible to man's ear.

The Ptolemaic system conjured up an optimistic view of the Renaissance, configuring man's centrality in an ordered frame within a chain of corresponding plaines, the "ladder to all high designs", which linked together all God's creation – the inanimate and the animate, the animal and the human – in a single, unifying metaphor. These reassuring principles, inherited from classical and Medieval tradition, were to be challenged by the innovative discoveries arising from the scientific observations of late Renaissance's thinkers, such as Copernicus and Galileo. In *The First Anniversary* of his *Anatomy of the World* (1611), John Donne aptly speaks of "And new Philosophy calls all in doubt, / The Element of fire is quite put out, / The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit / Can well direct him where to looke for it"[5] –; a concern

[3] W. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. S. Wells and G. Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

[4] Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 98.

[5] J. Donne, *An Anatomie of the World, wherein, by occasion of the Untimely Death of Mistris Elizabeth Drury, the Frailty and the Decay of This Whole World Is Represented. The first Anniversary* (1611), in *Donne. Poetical Works*, ed. Sir H.

that Theodore Spencer epitomized in the well known phrase: "belief in each one of the interrelated orders – cosmological, natural, and political – […] was being punctured by a doubt. Copernicus had questioned the cosmological order, Montaigne had questioned the natural order, Machiavelli had questioned the political order".[6]

This challenging perspective was taken up by Hiram Haydn who sought to establish a "counter revolution" or "counter Renaissance", as advocated by such rebel authors as Machiavelli, Pico, Agrippa, Bruno, Montaigne, and others.[7] In the field of poetry and drama, Shakespeare is at the top of the list, and Haydn finds the dramatist's most revolutionary output especially in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *As You Like It*, and some history dramas, where the ambiguity and dichotomy of Elizabethan thought are dramatically exposed in the heroes' characterization and in the chronicle plays' political concerns. However, the heterodox philosophy arising from Haydn's "counter Renaissance" is often marred by contradictory views that complicate any honest attempt to find out their most original and innovative paths. In order to disentangle this convoluted network of opposing views, Stephen Greenblatt proposed in an influential essay that "we need to find a more adequate way of accounting for the subversive elements in Renaissance texts, a way that neither cancels their existence entirely nor uses them to construct a visionary freemasonry in which all the artists one admires turn out to have been secretly enrolled".[8] A central point of Greenblatt's "Invisible Bullets" theory was the dual concept of subversion and containment, the capacity of the dominant culture to generate and control social and political disruption for its own ends, which the critic exemplified in Prince Hall and Falstaff's "political" alliance in *1 Henry IV*, where "an ideal image involves as its positive condition the constant production of

Grierson (London: Oxford University Press, 1968; First ed. 1933), ll. 205-208, pp. 213-4.

[6] T. Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1966; First ed. 1942), p. 29.

[7] H. Haydn, *The Counter Renaissance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950).

[8] S. Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion", in *Glyph*, 8 (1981): 40-60, rpd. with a few cuts and changes, in *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 21-65. See also, in this regard, the essays included in *Staging the Renaissance. Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. D. Scott Kastan and P. Stallybrass (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).

its own radical subversion and the powerful containment of that subversion".[9]

British cultural materialism provided an answer to this methodological warning by offering a new alliance of history and theory. In *Radical Tragedy*, analysing Shakespearean and Jacobean drama, Jonathan Dollimore argued that "in subverting the idea of a divinely ordered universe, these playwrights also subverted its corollary: the unified human subject supposedly positioned at the centre of that universe".[10] Thus, the malcontent and the anti-hero of much opposition drama of the period "ceases to be an integral part of the whole and becomes instead a focus for the contradictions and instabilities of the whole".[11] The most direct effects of this decentered world view are visible in the dramatists' exposure of various forms of social "othering", including the treatment of women, foreigners, and homosexuals. Taking these differing aspects of dramatization into account, foregrounding social, political, and religious questions mostly at stake in early modern England, we realize that "in the early seventeenth century the preoccupation with chaos, even when expressed in metaphoric, abstract or theological terms, was undoubtedly rooted in a fear of social change and social disorder",[12] primarily investing the kind of subversion related to gender, Protestant, and political issues, originating from marginal characters, such as women and strangers alike, that threatened the old patriarchal and theological system.[13] The kind of transgression obliquely inscribed in Jacobean theatre, in city comedies, tragedies, and satiric drama, as maintained by groundbreaking studies of Marxist and materialist scholarship like those by J. W. Lever, Margot Heinemann and Martin Butler,[14] focused

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[9] "Invisible Bullets", p. 53.

[10] J. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy. Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989; First ed. 1984), "Introduction to the Second Edition", p. XXX.

[11] Ibid., p. XXX.

[12] Ibid., p. 93.

[13] For the anti-theatrical controversy, strongly sustained by the Puritans' dogmatic tenets of gender construction and differentiation, see J. Dollimore, "Subjectivity, Sexuality, and Transgression: The Jacobean Connection, *Renaissance Drama*, n.s., XVII (1986): 53-81; S. Orgel, "Nobody's Perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 88, 1 (1989): 7-29, and *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[14] See M. Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre. Thomas Middleton and Opposition*

more specifically on the royal absolutism of the early Stuarts in the guise of diverse metaphorical motifs, such as game, lucre, lust, violence, political intrigue and social corruption, often dramatised within a context of "Italian" vices and courts, where religious controversy and political dissent could be easily masked, stored, or exorcised.[15]

The revisionary approach to the Renaissance – to use the introductory remarks of a recent collection of essays – took into account a broader concept of the literary, positing the assumption that critical investigation "might be elicited not only from literary texts but also from 'history', reconceived as 'co-text' rather than as context, background or source". Critical analyses of cultural materialism, therefore, "emphasized the extent to which all cultural representations are informed by relations of power, whether in the sphere of politics or religion, or, especially in the sphere of sexuality and gender".[16] Discarding earlier formalist criteria founded on the passive influence of antiquity, we should reassess the often divided concepts of tradition and innovation and seek a more integrated approach, as Philippa Berry has put it, "via the use of classical myth by some English literary texts, not only to ideas of classical origins but also to classical ideas of origin".[17]

Drama under the Early Stuarts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); J. W. Lever, *The Tragedy of State. A Study of Jacobean Drama* (London: Methuen, 1971); M. Butler, *Theatre and Crisis, 1632-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[15] Cf. M. Marrapodi, "Appropriating Italy: Towards a New Approach to Renaissance Drama", in *Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries: Rewriting, Remaking, Refashioning* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 1-12. For the Italian court as synonym for mischief, poison, and corruption see J. K. Hunter's pioneering essay, "English Folly and Italian Vice: The Moral Landscape of John Marston", in *Jacobean Theatre*, eds. J. R. Brown and B. Harris, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 1 (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 103: "As a mere location for sin other places were as effective as Italy, and went on being used; but for the background for political plotting and counterplotting Italy remained, from the time of Marston, the favourite location". The dramatic function of Italian topography is considered a structural constituent of Renaissance drama in *Shakespeare's Italy: Functions of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama*, ed. M. Marrapodi, A. J. Hoenselaars, M. Cappuzzo and L. Falzon Santucci (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997; First ed. 1993), "Introduction", pp. 1-13.

[16] Ph. Berry and M. Tudeau-Clayton (eds.), *Textures of Renaissance Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), "Introduction", pp. 3-4.

[17] Ph. Berry, "Renewing the Concept of Renaissance: The Cultural Influence of Paganism Reconsidered", in *Textures of Renaissance Knowledge*, p. 22. Berry's theoretical essay is centred on Marlowe's and Spenser's use of Paganism.

More recently, mobility studies, a relatively new critical trend advanced by Greenblatt, have asserted that the migration of literary *topoi*, models, texts, and discourses in the early modern period, facilitated various kinds of ideological confrontation with the dominant culture by raising anxieties regarding subjectivity and national identity. For the doyen of American New Historicism, Renaissance civilization reacted against the orthodoxy of medieval and humanist thinking, often investing the epistemic convictions through a cultural process of transgression and subversion of their reassuring ideologies. By questioning the traditional vision of cultures rooted in stable or fixed domestic customs, Greenblatt contends instead that in cultural analysis "we need to understand colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unintended consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, for it is these disruptive forces that principally shape the history and diffusion of identity and language, and not a rooted sense of cultural legitimacy".[18] The question of un-rootedness is therefore posed by a constant process of contamination and exchange with, and opposition to, alien cultures: hence, cultural and theatrical mobility is interested "in the way in which seemingly fixed migration paths are disrupted by the strategic acts of individual agents and by unexpected, unplanned, entirely contingent encounters between different cultures".[19]

Among the most revolutionary authors whose work and ideology deeply affected the birth of modern thinking, although operating through diverse levels of awareness and different fields and genres, such as Machiavelli, Aretino, Bruno, and Caravaggio in Italy, Shakespeare represents in Elizabethan and Jacobean England the strongest source of innovation and experimentation, erasing the constraints of social customs, myths, and literary conventions and making his own way from classical, medieval, and humanist tradition.

Shakespeare's natural aversion to any form of fixed, established ideas pinpoints a significant reaction against the concept of absolute authority in all fields of social, religious, and political life. Greenblatt elsewhere identifies the dramatist's contrariety to absolute values across

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[18] S. Greenblatt *et al.*, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 2.

[19] Ibid., p. 252. I have dealt with some aspects of Greenblatt's critique in "Introduction: Shakespearean Subversions", in *Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance: Appropriation, Transformation, Opposition*, ed. M. Marrapodi (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 1-17.

the multiple genres of his production with an unconstrained artistic freedom, by focusing on four underlying concerns of Shakespeare's imagination: "beauty – Shakespeare's growing doubts about the cult of featureless perfection and his interest in indelible marks; negation – his exploration of murderous hatred; authority – his simultaneous questioning and acceptance of the exercise of power, including his own; and autonomy – the status of artistic freedom in his work".[20] In subsequent chapters, dealing with the Sonnets, *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Tempest*, Greenblatt demonstrates a radical twist in the dramatic treatment of certain universal values which received a revolutionary modern swerve in Shakespeare's oeuvre.

The essays gathered in the present issue of "*In*Verbis" attempt to single out some aspects of opposition and subversion against the established hierarchies of culture, religion, and power in the works of a number of early modern English authors. Robert W. Haynes examines Thomas Elyot's minor political writings, especially *Of the Knowledge whiche Maketh a Wise Man* (1533) in which, using the Platonist dialogic form of humanist tradition, the author aims to distance himself from Henry VIII's religious reformation. In line with other political opponents, such as Thomas More, John Fisher, and Thomas Starkey, Elyot's ethics of power is endowed with a spirit of innovation which, under the cover of a Platonic strategy, is not openly transgressive, thereby evading possible imprisonment and death. Cristiano Ragni investigates the disruptive idea of religion which foregrounds Christopher Marlowe's topical play, *The Massacre at Paris*, where the theological strife between Catholics and Protestants and the political debate on the French wars are considered in the wider context of two eminent Italian thinkers, Alberico Gentili and Giordano Bruno, thus escaping the risk of censorship. Traditional Petrarchan poetry is set against Shakespeare's innovative handling of love by Camilla Caporicci in her essay on Shakespeare's sonnets to the "Dark Lady", where the ideal of a Petrarchan blazon is totally disrupted not only by the physical transformation in the representation of female beauty and sexuality but also by the reversal of conventional Christian virtues embedded in the concept itself of immaculate femininity. Contravening all the axioms of the canonical model, the "Dark Lady" sonnets display a dramatic twist towards an heterodox poetical and ontological paradigm. Much Shakespearean and Jacobean tragedy is centred on the political use

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[20] S. Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 4.

of poisoning, a device derived ultimately from Senecan and Italian tragedy, producing a pseudo-Machiavellian technique for the conquest and exercise of power. Giuseppe Leone's article takes a distinctive approach both to theory and the plays, analysing the failure of death by poison in Shakespeare when the assigned royal victim is not guilty of any vicious crime. What he calls "the ineffectiveness of poison" may suggest an ideological use on the part of the dramatist, a sort of theatrical norm or ethical reason, justified for its transgressive, political implications in the context of topical events and biblical references.

Another group of essays aims to register some challenging voices of dissent and of generic innovation, stemming from individual records from the London archives, the suggestiveness of theatrical practice, and discourse on subversion, crime, and female marginality. Through a careful scrutiny of the Minute Books kept in the rich archives of the London Bridewell Hospital, Duncan Salkeld presents a huge quantity of court prosecutions against a variety of petty criminals – vagrants, thieves, runaways, masterless men and women, adulterers and prostitutes, and those find "idle" or without work – who constitute an underworld of social marginality and transgression of particular interest for reconstructing the social and urban life of early modern London, which dramatists like Shakespeare and Middleton, Marston and Jonson, dramatised on the Renaissance stage. Another essay by Giuseppe Leone offers useful insights into the ways in which Elizabethan drama makes use of disruptive strategies of social and political dissent through its mechanism of theatrical communication to the audience, performing an appropriate scheme of transition from "universal" to "particular" data on the stage, accommodating authorial intention and contingent theatricality. The concluding essay by Manuela D'Amore supplies an account of female transgression in the dramatic role played by women within a selected number of anonymous writings debating female criminality, which circulated in London in late Elizabethan and early Stuart times. Based on women's household violence as a form of escapism from oppressive moral norms, D'Amore gives documentary evidence that women in Renaissance London were educated according to the strictest Christian precepts yet often turned to subversive social behaviours, as attested in the four anonymous texts under scrutiny, in order to undermine received creeds regarding patriarchal and family bonds.

All in all, the articles included in this issue of "*In*Verbis" seek to illustrate, through a variety of critical proposals and differing viewpoints, that the emphasis on alterity, transgression, and subversion

in the early modern English culture is now being supplemented by other approaches that explore in new ways those conflicting ideologies, epistemic contradictions, and social and political instability that characterized the early modern world.

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