



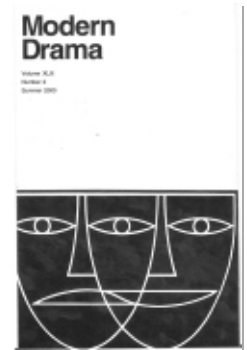
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*Good*

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# The Question of Liz: Staging the Prisoner in *Our Country's Good*

STEPHEN WEEKS

First performed at the Royal Court Theatre in 1988, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* is usually said to offer a strong defense of theatre – indeed, a celebration of its power – and, within the historical context of its premiere, to suggest the short-sightedness and social costs of Thatcherite cutbacks in arts subsidies. Yet this defense is more nuanced than is generally recognized, and the play's celebratory energies are everywhere qualified, revised, and deepened in ways I wish to address. To do so, I will weave together an account of Wertenbaker's treatment of subjectivity and agency in one of her principal female characters, the prisoner Liz Morden, with a complementary discussion of Stephen Greenblatt's theory of "subversion and containment" as a mode of power.

Greenblatt's work on English Renaissance drama, particularly his essay "Invisible Bullets" from *Shakespearean Negotiations*, published in 1988, has sparked considerable debate.<sup>1</sup> The essay formulates a somewhat notorious view of the modes of early modern power. "Subversion" and "containment" are key terms in this argument and will suffice as a label.<sup>2</sup> In essence, Greenblatt argues that subversion in Renaissance England could be both produced and contained as a function of state power and cultural orthodoxy. Despite an ingenious use of period materials, his argument has been widely discussed as a more general theory of power and its effects. Criticism focuses on its apparently totalizing view of orthodoxy; it seems to leave little room for resistance to power that is not always and already co-opted, since, he argues, subversion is produced by power to serve its own ends. Louis Montrose's *The Purpose of Playing* (1996) describes the controversy as a disagreement over "the nature and scope of the agency available to subjects of the early modern state, and the degree to which contestation of the dominant ideology and its institutions was possible and actualized."<sup>3</sup> Montrose seeks to break down the binary of subversion/containment in order to formulate a more flexible sense of power

relations that allows for "subtle discriminations among the modalities of resistance and among their various conditions of possibility."<sup>4</sup>

The conceptual friction between Greenblatt and Montrose provides a useful point of entry into one of the richest and most dramatically engaging scenes in *Our Country's Good*: "The Question of Liz."<sup>5</sup>

Liz Morden is the most intractable of prisoners. Captain Arthur Phillip, the Governor-in-Chief of the penal colony at New South Wales, calls her "[l]ower than a slave, full of loathing, foul mouthed, desperate" (58). Yet he does not think her incorrigible, and he charges Ralph Clark, the director of the convict production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, with her "redemption" (58). In "The Question of Liz" she is brought to a courtroom in which she is given the chance to declare her innocence of the crime of theft, a hanging offense. She has been tried once before and has said nothing, refusing to confirm or deny the charges against her. This time, however, she tells the presiding officers that she did not steal from the colony's food stores – a declaration that liberates her from the hanging tree and allows her to take part in *The Recruiting Officer*. In effect, she chooses between scaffolds – picking the stage over the gallows, the spectacle of Restoration comedy over the spectacle of crime and punishment. As she leaves the courtroom, Captain Phillip expresses the hope that Liz will be good in her role. In replying, Liz ends the scene: "Your Excellency," she says, "I will endeavour to speak Mr. Farquhar's lines with the elegance and clarity their own worth commands" (83).

The moment represents a victory for the convict actors and their work on *The Recruiting Officer* because the question of Liz's fate had clouded their prospects for performance. Now that Liz has traded scaffolds, the show will at last go on. In this sense, Liz seems to get the best of her interrogators in the scene, and her final line tends to read in performance as witty and self-possessed, even arrogant. Wertenbaker amplifies this effect by using the line as a scene-ender and a reversal at once. The reversal consists in the unexpected elegance of her vocabulary and phrasing. Prior to this moment Liz's linguistic identity has emerged most clearly from the lively form of eighteenth-century cant that characterizes her Act Two monologue, as well as from her refusal to speak at all. But now, perhaps in part as demonstration of her personal resources and as rebuke to those who regard her as incapable of such speech, she willfully and tactically employs the King's English. If we identify with Liz as a convict underdog confronting the smug classist and sexist assumptions of the military tribunal, the line acquires an aura of triumph.

But let us test Greenblatt's "subversion and containment" argument against this moment. The context tempts us to do so: an isolated, colonial outpost of an early modern society; a hierarchical, but precarious, order trying to ensure its own survival; a theatrical project. These are some of the same ingredients Greenblatt so provocatively mixes in "Invisible Bullets." Let us grant that there is at least an element of subversiveness in Liz's final utterance: that in

the gendered space of the courtroom, dominated by the male military and civil hierarchy, Liz controls her own destiny and reveals herself as a precise, and no doubt ironic, user of the prevailing discourse of class and power. But if there is merit in Greenblatt's subversion/containment paradigm, here construed in its most general form, we need to consider the possibility that we are witnessing not just subversion but its containment, both in the service of power.

The convict production of *The Recruiting Officer* is, of course, the product of power. Captain Phillip wants it done, and he wants Ralph Clark to carry it out. But the competition between civil and military authority within the camp opens a significant ideological fissure. Captain Phillip, although a commissioned officer, represents civil authority as Governor-in-Chief; in addition, he represents Enlightenment liberalism – the emergent ideology of his historical period. In Act Two, he describes the task facing him:

What is a statesman's responsibility? To ensure the rule of law. But the citizens must be taught to obey that law of their own will. I want to rule over responsible human beings, not tyrannise over a group of animals. I want there to be a contract between us, not a whip on my side, terror and hatred on theirs. (59)

Earlier in the play, Phillip had quoted Rousseau. Here he alludes to Locke. In rejecting the whip of the authoritarian social model – not simply a figure of speech, of course, in this context – and by giving voice to social contract theory, Phillip aligns himself with the progressive forces of his revolutionary age. But he is not advocating liberalism as a social model simply for the penal colony, but for the larger colony of Australia itself, of which New South Wales is merely the first European outpost. "Some of these men will have finished their sentence in a few years," he tells his men. "They will become members of society again, and help create a new society in this colony. Should we not encourage them now to think in a free and responsible manner?" (21).

The theatre, then, will be Phillip's vehicle for founding a more democratic society; it will inculcate the rule of law based on the striking notion that the law should serve individual liberty rather than protecting an entrenched order. He imagines that for the few hours during which *The Recruiting Officer* will be performed, a privileged space will be created in which "we will no longer be despised prisoners and hated gaolers" (21). Captain Phillip would not characterize these notions as subversive, but his officers do. "[I]nsubordination, disobedience, revolution" is one response (23).

If, within their historical context as well as within the local conditions of the camp, Phillip's ideas are subversive, what has he to gain by airing them through the production of *The Recruiting Officer*? Certainly he aims to test his theory of the social contract, but there is no whimsy in his approach. He recognizes that the production, once launched, will determine the fate of the colony. If his officers see that this putative contract is not observed by the

prisoners and that the production encourages misbehavior, mutiny will be certain. That is to say, if the social contract embodied in the production fails, the colony's chances for survival will diminish. Conversely, if it succeeds, chances for survival will increase. Phillip also insists that prisoners and marines receive the same rations – another democratizing principle. If the colony's stores are not renewed, he will have to cut rations, and if the officers see that there is no merit in Phillip's leadership, again, the likelihood of mutiny will increase. In this sense, the production displaces all other tests of leadership to create a definitive case. Phillip produces the conditions of subversion to validate his social order and to ensure the survival of his penal colony and the success of the civil colony-to-be.

There is an interesting connection of detail here between this analysis and "Invisible Bullets." In the first part of his essay, Greenblatt examines Thomas Harriot's *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588). Harriot depicts a situation similar to the one we find in *Our Country's Good*: the survival of a colony hinges upon the relations that obtain between a dominant European order and its other, in this case the non-European natives of Virginia. Greenblatt argues that Harriot's report of these relations can be construed in terms of the testing of the Machiavellian hypothesis that the origin and purpose of religion is social control.<sup>6</sup> In the sixteenth century, Greenblatt notes, this idea carried an atheistic and therefore radically subversive charge. Nonetheless, the testing of this subversive hypothesis was necessary in the New World, given that the European settlers depended upon the natives for food. Their cooperation was essential to the survival of the colony, and manipulation of the natives' religious beliefs ensured obedience. As Greenblatt sees it, it was only by testing a subversive hypothesis that the settlers could maintain their dominance.<sup>7</sup> Subversion was thereby contained by the power that produced it.

Phillip's political liberalism could be tested with his "native" population (i.e., the convicts) just as Harriot's Machiavellianism could be tested with his. And in both instances, the survival of their respective colonies ensured the replication of an old value system on a new continent. What the play dramatizes, however, are the moral compromises inherent in that value system. The presence of the Aboriginal Australian who witnesses the colony's activities reminds us that Enlightenment political philosophy cannot easily be divorced from its colonial aspirations. The civil society founded at New South Wales was the point of departure for a colonial expansion that would include the prolonged subjugation of the Aboriginal people. In this sense, Captain Phillip's aspirations for his civil society run afoul of the contradictions within Enlightenment philosophy itself. He sees social contract theory as leading to a more democratic and equitable order, but fails to account for the virulent effects of racism and the imperatives of Empire. Nonetheless, he commits himself to a "subversion and containment" strategy. He insists upon getting his production; yet its subversive potential as a democratizing and revolutionary event is contained to

the extent that it ensures the survival of the colony, and to the extent that the survival of the colony ensures the state's work of colonial expansion.

This theme is reinforced by the very plot of *The Recruiting Officer*. Captain Plume and Sergeant Kite are just back from Germany, and their mission, in addition to seduction, is to recruit for the military life at home and abroad. They are in the business of keeping the wheels of colonialism turning. What Liz and the other convicts are recruited into, then, is a recruitment plot. It is worth remembering that *Our Country's Good* ends with Sergeant Kite's first recruiting speech; at the same moment, in a juxtaposition I would consider typical of the play, "*the triumphant music of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony*" rises (91). The play closes in a context that is *both* celebratory and ironic.

There is another useful connection with Greenblatt's analysis of Thomas Harriot's *Report*. In Harriot's case, civil obedience is maintained by deploying the products of European civilization – religion, primarily, but also technology – to good advantage. Captain Phillip, at New South Wales, similarly offers his "natives" a product of European civilization: the language of Farquhar. He describes it as "a refined, literate language [...] expressing sentiments of a delicacy they are not used to" (21). In referring to Farquhar's "well-balanced lines," Ralph Clark notes that when the prisoners speak them they "acquire a dignity" and "[seem] to lose some of their corruption" (22). Wertenbaker's attitude here is complex. She is surely having some fun with the assumptions of eighteenth-century sentimentalism. At the same time, the evidence suggests that she would by no means discount the educational effects of a sophisticated idiom. In the 1991 revised edition of *Our Country's Good* Wertenbaker includes a preface that describes a production of Howard Barker's *The Love of a Good Man* that she, her actors, and her director, Max-Stafford Clark, attended during the summer of 1988. The Barker production took place at Britain's Wormwood Scrubs prison and was performed by the inmates. Of that occasion, Wertenbaker notes that "it confirmed all our feelings about the power and the value of theatre."<sup>8</sup> She then reprints a series of letters from the inmate-actors attesting to the ways in which theatre-making invigorates the spirit, trains the imagination, and constitutes "one of the only real weapons against ... hopelessness."<sup>9</sup> Phillip's gift of Farquhar's language to the prisoners partakes of this optimism. The play as a whole, however, is less ingenuous and presents a more complex view of the way theatre works within societies and of the effects it may have on individuals.

Liz's exit line in "The Question of Liz" depends upon her acquisition of the King's English through Farquhar, and, as I have suggested, the moment reads more as a besting of her male superiors than as a capitulation to the discourse that has, after all, dictated the terms of her oppression, incarceration, and transport and relegated her to permanent marginalization. But capitulation is present nonetheless. To the extent that she will now participate in Captain Phillip's civil society, she has been both reformed and recruited. By adopting Farquhar's language, even with ironic overtones, Liz becomes complicit in an

ideology to which she had been unalterably opposed, both by class and by experience – an ideology marked by the colonial mission that exiled her and that will presumably occupy her in the future. When Liz speaks Farquhar, her ability to manipulate the moment to her advantage is balanced by the certainty that the moment is ideologically inscribed in ways beyond her control.

If there is any doubt that the containment of subversion is a strong theme in this play, we should recall that just before the convicts take the stage to begin *The Recruiting Officer*, Ralph Clark prevails upon Wisehammer to cut his satirical prologue – the one containing the line “We left our country for our country’s good.” Hamlet, that other notable subversive, gets his sixteen-line insertion into the “Murder of Gonzago,” but Wisehammer gets only a platitude from Ralph about “private sacrifices for the good of the whole” (90). That the play’s title is taken from the line left out, the subversive sentiment contained, is another instance of a persistent irony that underlies even the moments that mostly strongly affirm the theatre’s progressive, redemptive power.

Ralph cuts Wisehammer’s prologue in the final scene, labeled “Backstage,” where Wertenbaker strongly evokes backstage comedy as a genre (83–91). The generic trappings of the scene – the pre-show nervousness, the adjusting of costumes, the heady atmosphere of romance – nearly overwhelm the subversive note that concludes “The Question of Liz.” The whole scene reverberates with a single generic imperative: the show must go on! It is no wonder that Ralph succeeds in deflecting Wisehammer’s biting prologue. The scene is a lovely valentine to the dynamics that make theatre perennially attractive to actors and audiences alike, but as it conforms to its type, it constrains the outbreak of more explosive or carnivalesque possibilities. Nonetheless, despite its generic drumbeat, the scene contributes to a nuanced presentation of the theatrical act. Conflicting personal, professional, and political demands are inescapable in the theatre, and if we see the subversive potential of a role-playing, democratizing, liberal experiment give way to other sorts of concerns – about personal relationships, professionalism, appearance, audience appeal, and so on – we are simply witnessing another aspect of theatre’s essential complexity. Wertenbaker’s genre choice may indeed be self-reflective, for she may be as concerned with providing a rousing finish to *Our Country’s Good* as the convicts are with providing a rousing beginning to *The Recruiting Officer*. In any case, the choice is neither ahistorical nor arbitrary, and Captain Phillip may take credit for setting in motion an unpredictable dynamic whose net effect, as represented in this backstage scene, is one of constraint and containment.

Perhaps we have reached the point that troubles Greenblatt’s critics. Can there be genuine resistance to power? Subversion without containment? Can humans become effective agents of their own self-fashioning, controlling their destinies in the face of ideological coercion? This returns us to the question of Liz.

To a large degree, her scenes involve questions of language. Her splendid monologue at the beginning of Act Two is Wertenbaker's ode to eighteenth-century street slang. But it is also a saga of Morden's victimization at the hands of men. She has been scapegoated by her father, pushed into prostitution by her brother, brought into the pickpocket trade by one of her johns, arrested, transported, arrested again; the hanging tree seems to her an inevitable outcome (53-54). After this confessional, she has a scene with John Wisehammer, a convict noted for being both Jewish and literate. Wisehammer is a lover of words, and his vocabulary puts Liz off. "Speak in English," she tells him. When he does so, he reiterates his innocence of crime and insists that he will return to England. "What do you want to go back to England for?" she asks him. "You're not English." Wisehammer: "I was born in England. I'm English." Liz: "You have to think English. I hate England. But I think English. And him, Arscott, he's not said anything since they brought him in, but he's thinking English, I can tell" (54).

What "speaking and thinking in English" seems to mean for Liz is that there is no hope or possibility for change if you are already marginalized. Lacking agency, she experiences the world in terms of that which is done to her; resignation to a bleak fate, she feels, is her only recourse. Wisehammer is Jewish and a criminal, yet he expects to return home and be accepted; the blind naïveté that gives him hope disqualifies him, in Liz's mind, from being English. A few moments later in the scene Arscott yells: "There's no escape!" "That's English," Liz says. "You know things" (55).

Yet when she unexpectedly speaks another kind of English, Farquhar's English, in "The Question of Liz," she seems to grasp the possibility of other subject positions as firmly as she grasps the theatrical moment. Here Louis Montrose's commentary on Greenblatt is helpful. Montrose argues against the binary opposition of "subversion and containment" by constructing a view of subjectivity that allows for a genuine, if limited, agency. The subject, he argues, is produced through "an equivocal process." Ideology is not simply produced and inscribed monologically, and even "collective structures may enable as well as constrain individual agency" if "they are experienced by the subject as multiple, heterogeneous, and even contradictory."<sup>10</sup> He continues:

the very process of subjectively *living* the confrontations or contradictions *within* or *among* ideological formations may make it possible for us to experience facets of our own subjection at shifting internal distances – to read, as in a refracted light, one fragment of our ideological inscription by means of another. A reflexive knowledge so partial and unstable may, nevertheless, provide subjects with a means of empowerment as agents.<sup>11</sup>

Montrose's view of subjectivity is not simply a matter of what one is sub-

jected to and what is beyond one's control, but of a subject's ability to find room for action in the interstices of ideological positions.

When Liz speaks the King's English, there is inscription: the moment confirms a degree of consent to the Captain's essentially colonial vision. At the same time, the moment is performative; by coming to understand that "speaking English" is not a univocal act, she displays an ability to maneuver among ideological positions – revealing them as unstable. What can be feigned, one could argue, can be understood and ultimately manipulated, and here the acting of class position reveals the constructedness of class position. To the extent that Liz turns in a credible performance of class in the courtroom, she ratifies the Captain's liberal vision, but because the ratification is performative, it is fundamentally ambiguous. Sincerity or irony? The dignity of class position, expressed in well-balanced sentences, or its mockery? With her exit line she learns what it means to present a credible fiction to an appreciative audience, but she also raises the possibility that the production of a credible fiction is a mode of power and a means of agency. In Montrose's language, she perhaps begins "to read, as in a refracted light, one fragment of [her] ideological inscription by means of another."<sup>12</sup>

We might also point to the bias of Restoration comedy: toward a social display that is both elegant *and* cunning. Ralph Clark's rehearsals may have imparted that lesson as well. In any case, the subversive potential of Liz's moment is not utterly dissipated by the containment strategies to which I have referred. We might think of her as achieving a limited agency deriving from the performative contradictions of "speaking English."

There is yet another route to this conclusion. What all backstage plays do is to dramatize rehearsal. And what *Our Country's Good* does extraordinarily well is to give us a rehearsal process that is fraught with ideological contestation. Nearly every facet of power, including class, wealth, hierarchy, and gender, is put up for examination. The rehearsal process depicted in the play lowers barriers, encourages the shifting of perceptions, nurtures role playing and discussion, enactment and its analysis. When Montrose talks about the possibility of agency through "the very process of subjectively *living* the confrontations or contradictions *within* or *among* ideological formations," making it possible for us "to experience facets of our own subjection at shifting internal distances,"<sup>13</sup> he could easily be describing the process of rehearsal and performance. Indeed, he argues that Elizabethan drama created "inherent" opportunities for resistance and demystification.

Through various formal means, the drama enacted in the Elizabethan playhouses creates a multiplicity of perspectives. Yet within the context of an absolutist ideology, such multiplicity signified an inherent capacity to produce heterodoxy.<sup>14</sup>

*Our Country's Good* splendidly dramatizes the "inherent capacity to pro-

duce heterodoxy" within an absolutist regime, but it locates this capacity in rehearsal more than in performance. This emphasis provides an interesting qualification to Montrose's argument.

Indeed, the real achievement the play depicts is not the convict production itself, of which we get only a glimpse, but, rather, that Captain Phillip, Ralph Clark, and the convicts succeed in authorizing a space and time for rehearsal. Within the rigid constraints of penal authority, they provide a boundary within which this special contestation of orthodoxy can take place. This authorization of subversion, this license for rehearsal, encourages a genuine resistance to the strategies of containment I have outlined. When Liz speaks the King's English, she manages, if only for a moment, to turn the courtroom into her own theatre. Or perhaps more precisely, given the play's strategic interest in the rough-and-tumble of rehearsal, she takes the special authority of the rehearsal space with her into the courtroom. By "rehearsing her performance" of class, she effectively delegitimizes and destabilizes the court's authority. My earlier point that the moment is also ideologically encoded and that some of its subversive energy is contained by her "recruitment" into a larger colonial scheme is not overruled. Montrose defines "*subjectification*" as "an equivocal process" that "endows subjects with *subjectivity* and with the capacity for agency" while "it *subjects them to* ... social networks and cultural codes, forces of necessity and contingency, that ultimately exceed their comprehension or control."<sup>15</sup> It is this balancing of forces in a complex exchange that "The Question of Liz" persuasively captures.

*Our Country's Good* reveals the doubleness of theatre, as a societal institution with ideological functions and as subversive space in which ideologies can be teased out, exposed, and challenged. The play uses the dynamics of rehearsal and performance to expose those complex processes of subject-creation that Montrose calls "subjectification." "The Question of Liz," as a strong case in point, ends with a moment that is both ideologically inscribed and ideologically resistant, suggesting the birth of agency as well as its limitation and constraint. Perhaps rehearsal/performance suggests an apt metaphor for the Greenblatt-Montrose debate as well. Rehearsal tends toward an open-ended and dialogical process emphasizing choice and agency; performance tends toward fixity and the insertion of the actor into a larger structure generative of meanings far beyond the range of individual choice. "The Question of Liz" engages both worlds and is deeply equivocal in its implications. The complexity of the scene enriches the play's presentation of theatre-making and qualifies even the final moments, when the celebration of "the power and the value of theatre" reaches its crescendo.

#### NOTES

1 See Louis Montrose's able discussion of this debate in "Texts and Histories," his

- prologue to *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), 1–16.
- 2 Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets," in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988). For Greenblatt's use of the terms, see, for example, 30 and 39–41.
  - 3 Montrose, "Texts and Histories," 7–8. See note 1.
  - 4 *Ibid.*, 11.
  - 5 Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, rev. ed. (London: Methuen, 1991), Act Two, scene ten, 79–83. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
  - 6 Greenblatt, 26. See note 2.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, 30.
  - 8 Timberlake Wertenbaker, preface to *Our Country's Good* (see note 5).
  - 9 Joe White to Timberlake Wertenbaker, April 1989, appended to Wertenbaker, preface to *Our Country's Good*.
  - 10 Montrose, "Texts and Histories," 16, 15.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, 16.
  - 12 *Ibid.*
  - 13 *Ibid.*
  - 14 Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, 85.
  - 15 Montrose, "Texts and Histories," 16.