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Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Marxist Humanism*

Jonathan Dollimore

BACK IN 1982 Alan Sinfield and I thought that, despite obvious differences, there was sufficient convergence between British cultural materialism and American new historicism to bring the two together in a collection of essays. Things were different then, and we envisaged something like a progressive alliance between the two in a field that badly needed both. The result, *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, appeared in 1985.¹

Recent articles by American critics sympathetic to the British materialist critical project—including Carolyn Porter, Louis Montrose, Don Wayne, Walter Cohen, and Karen Newman—persuade me that something like an alliance has indeed occurred, even though some of these critics have rightly remarked the differences between the two movements.²

Further, the backlash against *both* movements persuades me that they do indeed overlap: in the United States political struggles, of a kind American academics once told me were specific to the United Kingdom, are developing around, and for, the humanities. Rightly or wrongly, new historicism has been identified as a development which has politicized the humanities. So long as historicists do not lose their political nerve, there may be an even closer convergence in the future.

However, it is ironic that those most aware of this alliance are also most sensitive to the differences, whereas those who have most closely linked the two movements have usually been hostile to both, and ill-informed, especially about cultural materialism. Because of these factors—the development of an alliance concurrent with an ignorance of the British work among those who dislike and mis-

* This essay was prompted by an invitation from Ralph Cohen, editor of *New Literary History*, to reply to a critique of new historicism and cultural materialism by Richard Levin, to be published in the same issue of that journal. Nothing in Levin's article inspired me to take up this generous offer. However I have been prompted to respond to three other critics.

represent both—it would be appropriate for me to comment now on some of the differences. That would involve me in a critique of some, though by no means all, new historicist work. There are several reasons why I decline to make that critique here and now, and they include a strong dislike of the way new historicists have been attacked in recent essays. As Howard Horowitz puts it: “In their prompt politicization of empirical differences, these polemical essays risk becoming, frankly, a new moralism, in that disputes about evidence and its interpretation are subordinated to the rush to judgment and recast as sanction or censure.” One essay in particular, he says, “at times achieves an inquisitorial tone.”³

If I decline to criticize new historicism it is not because I think there are no important differences between it and cultural materialism—there are. I refrain first as a protest against the punitive moralism of which Horowitz speaks; second because new historicists can look after themselves; third and most important because I want to rearticulate and develop some of the objectives of a materialist criticism, and to respond to some recent critics of it: Carol Neely and Lynda Boose, both of whom write from an explicitly feminist position, and Kiernan Ryan, who might be characterized as Marxist humanist.⁴

I'll argue that Neely, Ryan, and Boose misrepresent materialist work. Neely does so in part by appending it to new historicism.⁵ Indeed, she finds sufficient similarity between the two to conflate new historicism and cultural materialism with the term “cult-historicists.” Revealingly if unintentionally, her neologism reduces the British work to a fashionable modifier of its more substantial American manifestation. She might thereby be accused of perpetuating the imperialism of the American academy which, in its sexist form, so angers her. Certainly she is ignorant of, or uninterested in, precisely that which for others has constituted a main difference between British and American work: both movements, she says, represent the Renaissance as “a world which is hierarchical, authoritarian, hegemonic, *unsubvertible*,” and in doing so reproduce our world in the same terms (12; my emphasis). In fact, the two movements have differed over just this: it is new historicism which has been accused of finding too much containment, while cultural materialism has been accused of finding too much subversion.

Feminisms, Sexualities, and Gender Critique

A preliminary word about the cumbersome subheading to this section. Its categories, as well as my pluralizing of each, are meant

to indicate not distinct areas of inquiry, but ones which overlap and intersect. I truly believe that some of the most illuminating discussions of gender and sexuality are at the points of connection and controversy between these areas. For instance, analysis from feminist, lesbian, gay, and materialist perspectives will typically interrelate. Also, to believe in cultural politics as a praxis and not just a position is to recognize the need for alliances between positions which are not identical. At the same time there may be important areas of dispute or, at the very least, different histories and diverse objectives which it is important to recognize; for instance, not only are there different feminist perspectives, but not all analyses of gender and sexuality can or should be described as feminist. By the same token we should not talk of sexuality in the singular, nor, for that matter, should gender and sexuality be confused. The very concept of gender itself requires critique since it is usually used in ways which take little or no account of nonheterosexual orientations, and sometimes used in ways which ignore what inextricably relates to it. Hence, "sexualities and gender critique." Other important differences may separate these perspectives, including what is often proposed as the essentialist versus constructionist debate. Essentialists tend to see human identity (including gender) as something relatively stable and wholly or in part presocial, while constructionists concentrate on the extent to which it is socially formed and so changes across time within a culture and also differs between cultures. This is an all too brief characterization of an enduring yet shifting and complex debate, but it will serve here if we approach the distinction as a question of emphasis rather than either/or exclusiveness, and as something which itself needs to be analyzed as well as invoked in the service of analysis.

The widespread tendency by recent critics to see identity as socially constituted rather than essentially given may well be the most important single factor leading both Boose and Neely to accuse those critics of silencing or marginalizing women.⁶ For example, Boose contends that in materialist critiques, gender "ends up getting displaced into some other issue—usually race or class—and women are silently eradicated from the text" (729).⁷ Let's consider the context of the disagreement. Lisa Jardine and Kathleen McLuskie have made important contributions to a materialist perspective on gender in Renaissance studies.⁸ Jardine contests the essentialism of some first-generation Shakespearean feminists, whereby the bard's female characters are seen to "reflect accurately the whole range of specifically female qualities . . . supposed to be fixed and immutable from Shakespeare's own day down to our own" (2), and goes on

to argue that the strong interest in women shown on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage does not reflect an increasing liberty for women at that time, but "is related to the patriarchy's unexpressed worry about the great social changes which characterize the period" (6). Jardine shows how such fears were focused in terms of the "disorderly" women on and off the stage. Similarly, McLuskie dissents from what she calls the "liberal feminism" which would co-opt Shakespeare: "Feminist criticism need not restrict itself to privileging the woman's part or to special pleading on behalf of female characters. It can be equally well served by making a text reveal the conditions in which a particular ideology of femininity functions and by both revealing and subverting the hold which such an ideology has for readers both female and male" (106). Her study of *King Lear* exemplifies an important trend in feminist criticism, one which connects with other kinds of gender analysis: "The misogyny of *King Lear* . . . is constructed out of an ascetic tradition which presents women as the source of the primal sin of lust, combining with concerns about the threat to the family posed by female insubordination. However, the text also dramatises the material conditions which lie behind assertions of power within the family, even as it expresses deep anxieties about the chaos which can ensue when the balance of power is altered" (106). McLuskie's article is singled out for criticism by both Neely and Boose, along with other articles which I'll briefly summarize before replying to the criticisms.

In a study of *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*, Jacqueline Rose shows how sexuality is implicated in issues of aesthetic form. Drawing on a psychoanalytic perspective, she shows how in these plays, and in criticism of them, the woman is made a focus "for a set of ills which the drama shows as exceeding the woman *at the same time* as it makes of her their cause."⁹ In "Transgression and Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*," in *Political Shakespeare*, I offer a similar approach, showing how social crisis is displaced onto the prostitutes of the play.¹⁰ They are made (in the words of Barbara Babcock) "symbolically central" even while remaining utterly marginal: everything in the play presupposes them, yet they have no voice or presence.¹¹ Those who speak on their behalf do so as exploitatively as those who want to destroy them. The prostitutes are precisely "spoken for." The condition of their being made central is that they are actually marginal, and of their demonizing that they be powerless. For different reasons and with differing emphases, these three essays share a belief that gender is implicated in the entire social domain. Carol Neely accuses them (among many others) of treating gender in a way that blocks, displaces, or defers it, or turns it into something

else, or makes it cease to matter (9–11). McLuskie especially is criticized for not demonstrating how a feminist perspective might practice what she advocates, namely explore the conditions of texts' production and reproduction and problematize its ideology. But this is exactly what McLuskie does. Neely not only overrides McLuskie's argument, but misrepresents it by eliding it with Stephen Greenblatt's different approach in "Fiction and Friction."¹²

McLuskie is also criticized by Boose, for reasons similar to Neely's, but for others also, including the charge that she (McLuskie) expresses a "puritanical" (726) insistence that to be a feminist "is to renounce completely one's pleasure in Shakespeare, and embrace instead the rigorous comforts of ideological correctness" (724). This has the consequence, says Boose, that "McLuskie can only warn us away from Shakespeare in terms that warn us away from pleasure" (724). But McLuskie does not say, or advocate, this. She actually argues for a reading of Shakespeare in which "feminist criticism must also assert the power of resistance, subverting rather than co-opting" him (106). I would have thought the pleasure of subversion to be rather greater than the pleasure of co-option. But what is at issue is not pleasure versus puritanism but different kinds of pleasure, different kinds of historical inquiry, and different kinds of politics.¹³ And even were we to leave aside the pleasure of subversion, it does not follow that McLuskie is toeing some grim, politically correct line; this really is a very tired caricature of the materialist. McLuskie is, in the first instance, seeking to practice the responsibilities of the historian as well as the commitment of the feminist, *and* seeking to show that they are not incompatible. But pleasure is indeed important, especially now, when politically motivated critics are becoming self-conscious about the solemn, punitive, not to say boring tone of much of what we write. I'll return to this, only noting here that the most famous pleasure of the text—I mean Roland Barthes's book of that name—is organized around the *perversity* of pleasure, something which is not addressed in this dispute, and which rarely figures in gender criticism at all.¹⁴

Prostitution

In the essay on *Measure for Measure* I remarked the silence of the prostitutes. Although everything in the play presupposes them, not one of the prostitutes speaks. My point is that this absence, this silence, is one of the most revealing indications of the extent of their powerlessness and exploitation. Yet Neely interprets this as *my*

having “silenced . . . the issues of women, sexuality and prostitution” (10). But the silence identified in this text is not a critical invention. In her detailed study of the regulations governing brothels in Southwark, Ruth Karras concludes by remarking that they “provide frustratingly little information on the prostitutes themselves and how the brothels and brothel keepers shaped their experience. There is no evidence as to whether the prostitutes of the stews felt any group identity in contrast with illicit prostitutes or other women. . . . The restrictions under which they operated have left traces, but the prostitutes themselves have not.”¹⁵

Even so, we know enough to state what official discourse leaves out, and it may be worth reiterating: “the life of most prostitutes . . . was abject. . . . poverty drove them to the brothels and after a relatively short stay in which they had to run the hazards of disease, violence and contempt, most were driven back to [poverty].”¹⁶

This is not merely an issue of one critic misinterpreting another. Fundamental issues are at stake: issues of representation, the status of history, literature’s relation to it; the possibility of recovering the history of the excluded; different ways of understanding gender, and so on—issues which involve us all. McLuskie, Rose, and I do indeed attend to the complex ways in which women are marginalized and silenced. We attend also to the way diverse social anxieties are displaced onto or into sexuality, and to the interconnections between women’s subordination and other kinds of subordination. But it does not follow, as Neely suggests, that by describing these processes we are complicit with them.

It is precisely because most prostitutes, to the utmost degree, were victims of a heterosexual economy, that we should not rely exclusively on the gendered vision of that economy to represent them. That is one reason why I discuss them in the context of other demonized groups—the vagrant, the rogue, the “homosexual.” Neely appears to object to this. But such groups *were* aligned in the discourses of that period.

Neely insists that feminist criticism “needs to over-read, to read to excess, the possibility of human (especially female) gendered subjectivity, identity, and agency, the possibility of women’s resistance or even subversion” (15). OK, but how exactly might one do that in the case of prostitutes? Certainly there are various ways in which the brothel and prostitution can be romanticized: the whore with a heart of gold; the brothel as the place of an irrepressible, carnivalesque low life. Raymond Williams hardly wrote severely of anyone, but some of his harshest words are reserved for Brecht’s

representation of low life in *The Threepenny Opera*. “Nothing,” writes Williams, “is more predictable, in a falsely respectable society, than the conscious enjoyment of a controlled and distanced low life. All such work reveals itself, finally, as a protection of conventional moral attitudes. The thieves and the whores are the licensed types, on to whom a repressed immorality can very easily be projected, and through whom a repressed conscience can be safely controlled. There is no real shock, when respectable playgoers confront them, because they are seen, precisely, as a special class, a district.”¹⁷

Against the romanticizing of the prostitute in early modern England we might cite the equally fictional yet rather more truthful representation in *Love’s Cure* (1624?), where the prospects of a woman pursuing independence are described thus:

thou wouldst be
A bawd e’re twenty, and within a moneth
A barefoot, lowzie, and diseased whore,
And shift thy lodgings oftner than a rogue
That’s whipt from post to post.¹⁸

Here too whore and rogue are aligned.

In other plays of this period we can witness the process whereby those who are powerless, subordinate, and marginal become the focus for a crude scapegoating which should not really be described as such because it is in fact a process of complex displacement, disavowal, and splitting. Iago, at a crucial moment in his manipulation of the violent crisis he has precipitated, seeks to displace blame onto Bianca, vulnerable to the charge because a strumpet: “O notable strumpet! . . . / Gentlemen all, I do suspect this trash / To be a party in this injury.”¹⁹ Like the sodomite and the masterless, the whore is, in times of crisis, construed as one who betrays those who in fact are betraying or victimizing her. The strategy is simple enough, but the cultural “unconscious” it exploits is complex. Both Emilia and Desdemona are accused by their husbands of being whores, and female prostitution in *Measure for Measure* is made symptomatic of far more than sexual infidelity:

Duke: [to Mariana] Why, you are nothing then: neither maid, widow, nor wife?

Lucio: My lord, she may be a punk; for many of them are neither maid, widow, nor wife.

(5.1.177–80)

Respectable women are maids, widows, or wives; otherwise they are punks, imagined to be subverting the patriarchal order even as they are the victims of its displacements. But of course the opposition wife/whore is itself a notoriously unstable one, especially within hetero/sexual difference. As we see in *Othello*, the chaste wife is as susceptible to the massive displacements of patriarchy by “virtue” of her inclusion within it as is the subtle whore in terms of her exclusion from it.

Constructionist Theory

To a greater or lesser degree the articles by McLuskie, Rose, and myself deploy a constructionist view of gender and sexuality. I think there *are* problems with this view, but not of the kind identified by Neely. One problem with it is the risk of erasing or downplaying the actual histories of subordinate groups; of seeing their history only as one of victimization. And a further problem (usually gendered) arises in the form of critics who represent or rehearse the victimization with an unnerving—sometimes almost salacious—empathy with the process rather than its victims.

There’s a third problem, one which I’ll identify in an admittedly abrupt transition from the Renaissance to contemporary gay politics where the problem of the constructionist view has been starkly apparent for some time. Try telling a couple of fascists that, strictly speaking, the homosexual they are kicking to death is only a discursive construct produced sometime in the nineteenth century, or just possibly at the end of the eighteenth. . . . In the totally impossible event that they believed you, picked him up, and dusted him down, it might only be to take him off for aversion/conversion “therapy.” After all, anyone who has been “made” that way can be unmade. This is a real and pressing issue: there is nothing to stop homophobia, terrifyingly intensified by AIDS, from appropriating the constructionist view. Even so, it is naive to believe that if we can somehow show that homosexuality is essentially or biologically given, it will be accepted. On the contrary, that might be when the fascists start murdering—as they did before when faced with what Richard Plant, in his study of the Nazi murder of homosexuals, calls “contra-genics.”²⁰ And even if they don’t shoot you they sure as hell won’t opt for the liberal line—yeah, well you’re not exactly man or woman, but you’re still human. Nor should we forget that nothing attracts some in the medical profession like the prospect of a bit of genetic engineering or biological interventionism.

Certainly there are political problems with the constructionist view,

but for the gay person, and, I'd argue, for other subordinated groups, the appeal to nature or essence is no guarantee of protection at all. And if we're tired of the critical play whereby representation is recast as re-hyphen-presentation, let's try to distinguish the crucial point from its fashionable deployment; I take that point to be the recognition of the terrible power and often the violence of representation; the recognition that it is never merely a reflection of the pregiven, but something which helps both to control and constitute what is given and what is thought.

The "New" Humanism?

On the first page of his "new reading" of Shakespeare Kiernan Ryan announces his intention to read the bard in a way which will "activate the revolutionary imaginative vision" of the plays. Ryan contends that this period witnessed the emergence of a new sense of a common humanity: "what starts to evolve is the understanding that every individual is at the same time a *human* being, whose faculties, needs, experiences and aspirations are actually shared, or potentially shareable, with the rest of the species" (29–30). Shakespeare articulates this sense of a common humanity so radically, supremely, and mutinously, that it has required a "massive investment of conservative cultural energy over the centuries in trying to keep his work muzzled" (30). In the greatest of Shakespeare's plays Ryan finds a "structural identification . . . with the common interests of humanity as a whole rather than with the interests of one section of society at the expense of the rest" (38). Ryan has to rely a great deal on the idea of this radical vision as potentiality rather than actuality. The tragedies show "the brutal destruction of the potential by the actual"; while the comedies "dramatise the surrender of the prevailing to the possible" (74).

Where does the sense of a shared humanity and potentiality come from? This isn't clear; while Ryan sees it as emerging in the Renaissance (and so historically contingent), the implication sometimes is that it was always inherent in human nature. Othello and Desdemona for example "instinctively act according to principles of racial equality and sexual freedom" and are punished by society, "the play's subversive potential" residing in its capacity "to dramatise the possibility of truly emancipated relations between men and women, beyond the institutionalized inequalities of past and present societies alike" (51).

Among other things, Marxist humanism has affirmed a faith in

Man, the individual, and the progressive liberatory potential of high culture. As an aspect of this tradition the notion of a “progressive Shakespeare” is important and commendable. But not in Ryan’s version. The most persuasive part of his argument is indebted to others (including feminists, new historicists, and cultural materialists). Like them, for example, he sees Shakespeare’s vision as growing from the historical upheavals of that period. He also shares the view of some materialists and some feminists that Elizabethan and Jacobean drama was subversive and demystifying, representing the divisions between people as “socially constructed and arbitrary rather than god-given or natural” (29).

But although he’s apparently learned from these critics, Ryan usually fails to acknowledge, or actually misrepresents, them. When he finds Stephen Greenblatt saying something which flatly contradicts his (Ryan’s) representation of him, he interprets this as Greenblatt contradicting himself (25–26), rather than, as he should, as Greenblatt’s position being more responsive to the complexities of history and representation than Ryan allows. Cultural materialism is not discussed, and those of its adherents who *do* get a mention are categorized as new historicist. McLuskie’s reluctance to co-opt Shakespeare for feminism, and my argument that prostitutes are shown in *Measure* to be demonized and made the subject of displacement, are read by Ryan as conclusive proof that we subscribe to a “vision of the inexorably enveloping power of the dominant ideology to turn even Shakespeare’s protean imagination to its own account,” so that we are left with “merely negative or cynical reasons for bothering to study such a contaminated Shakespeare at all” (8)—a ridiculously crude version of the new historicist position, let alone the materialist one.

What he does with Shakespeare isn’t much more successful. His apparently intense concentration on the bard turns out, on further reading, to be the sightless gaze of the always-already convinced. His rhetoric of potentiality may well be a result of conviction, but while initially it strikes the reader as liberating, it soon starts to read like consoling rhetoric. Shakespeare’s plays become pegs on which to hang aspirations commendable in themselves but which here echo the clichés of the party hack. Thus the desperate, despairing ending of *King Lear* “leaves us no choice but to identify the problem as the indefensible subjection of men and women to the injustices of a stratified society, and to seek the implied solution in the egalitarian standpoint created and vindicated by the play as a whole” (72; my emphasis). *Macbeth* bears witness to “our historically evolved capacity to create . . . forms of community able to accom-

moderate the claims of self and the needs of others" (65), while Shakespeare's comedies "encapsulate the benevolent course of collective human development which they anticipate" (80).

Ryan's failure is the more regrettable because we *need* a spirited reiteration of Marxist humanism. Others have addressed it better, both those who belong to that tradition as well as those sympathetic to it: one thinks of Lukács, Marcuse, Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and Agnes Heller (Ryan acknowledges a debt to Heller), and, in the more specific field of Renaissance and Shakespeare studies, J. W. Lever, Robert Weimann, and Margot Heinemann, to name but some.

Such writers have faced the challenges to humanist optimism from an alternative, more pessimistic Marxist tradition of cultural critique.²¹ It is a tradition which has recognized the complexity and indirect effectiveness of domination, along with the fact that human potentialities have not only been savagely repressed, but also abandoned and repudiated by their former adherents and those who have most to gain from them. Some of the most powerful Marxist cultural critique this century, to which cultural materialist as well as some feminist and some new historicist work is indebted, has attended to the reasons for the failure of potential to be realized. It has asked why, for example, after the First World War, when conditions seemed right for the development of socialism, fascism developed instead.

And what is the role of high culture in all this? There is a stereotype of the Marxist critic as one who analyzes such culture as a mere superstructural reflection of the economic base—art as simply either for or against the revolution. In fact Marxian cultural critique has produced a far more searching analysis, and has been much preoccupied with what Martin Jay, alluding to Marx on religion, calls "the inherently ambiguous nature of high-culture, at once a false consolation for real suffering, and an embattled refuge of the utopian hopes for overcoming that very misery."²²

Moreover, far from opting for the facile optimism dictated by dogma, writers as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Louis Althusser, have felt it necessary to describe the complexity, the flexible resilience of power structures, and their internalization within the individual. These writers have been without illusion—even pessimistic—about the short- or medium-term possibilities of progressive change, and it's not surprising that today materialists, historicists, feminists, and others find a continuing relevance in their work. But their pessimism was distinct from fatalism; for them it was a contingent historical

reality that prevents development towards a radically better society, and not fate, human nature, or any other kind of absolute which makes such development always and forever impossible. Some such distinction animates Gramsci's famous maxim, "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

Finally the questioning of high culture is not exclusively Marxist. George Steiner once offered a notorious rebuttal to the easy faith in the humanizing influence of high culture: "To read Aeschylus or Shakespeare—let alone to 'teach' them—as if . . . the authority of the texts in our own lives were immune from recent history, is subtle but corrosive illiteracy. . . . We come after. We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning. To say that he has read them without understanding, or that his ear is gross, is cant."²³ Often lapsing into such cant, Ryan does not even begin to face the challenge of Steiner's now twenty-year-old argument, let alone its even more searching articulation in the European materialist tradition.

Dangerous Knowledge: The Instance of Cross-Dressing

But what kind of resistance, if any, does a materialist criticism discover in Renaissance tragedy? I argued in *Radical Tragedy* that we find in this theater not so much a vision of political freedom as a knowledge of political domination.²⁴ But we simply cannot slide between the two, or assume that the second easily produces the first. This knowledge *was* challenging: it subverted, interrogated, and undermined the ruling ideologies and helped precipitate them into crisis. But history tells us time and again that from such crisis there may emerge not freedom but brutal repression. And such repression emerges not because the subversive was always contained, subversion being a ruse of power to consolidate itself, but because the challenge really *was* unsettling.

Further, that knowledge is often produced at a great cost. Richard Wilson has described *Radical Tragedy* as a "new historicist primer" presenting Shakespearean drama as "the cutting edge of liberation."²⁵ In fact, the book argued at some length that, in the plays of Shakespeare and many others, subversive knowledge emerges under pressure of contradictions in the dominant ideology which also fissure subjectivity; the subjects who discover or convey this knowledge are

often thereby stretched across social and psychic contradictions that destroy them. "Liberation" is not the word for this.

Nevertheless a challenge did occur, and gender hierarchy and sexual difference were targets of this dangerous knowledge.²⁶ In this respect perhaps the greater challenge in the literature of this period came not from "positive" representations of women within a patriarchal order (Neely), nor from some equally unproblematic, unrealized potential for "truly emancipated relations between men and women" (Ryan), but from representations of disreputable women who disrupted the scheme of (hetero)sexual difference. A case in point is cross-dressing in the drama and in Jacobean England, the subject of a spate of recent articles, and one of the most interesting and important aspects of gender currently being reconsidered. Orthodoxy at that time insisted that differences in dress were not merely conventional, but a reflection of one of God's most fundamental principles of order in the world: sexual difference. Cross-dressing spelled "confusion" in the far-reaching, devastating, religious sense of the word. Intense anxieties about social change and its unsettling of gender and class hierarchies were punitively displaced, in dramatic as well as nondramatic literature, onto the issue of dress violation, especially women dressing in men's clothes. Conversely, in some plays and tracts, cross-dressing is used to challenge traditional evaluations of women's inferior nature and status. In these texts cross-dressing is a specific and fascinating instance of something which occurs in the drama more generally: metaphysical legitimations of the social order are interrogated and displaced by the recognition that it is custom, not nature or divine law, that arranges things as they are; and that the laws of custom may also be the laws of privilege and domination.

Cross-dressing epitomizes the strategy of transgressive reinscription, whereby, rather than seeking to transcend the dominant structures responsible for oppression and exclusion, the subject or subculture turns back upon them, inverting and perverting them. Thus when the *Hic Mulier* figure in the *Haec-Vir* pamphlet of 1620 proclaims the equality of women—"We are as free born as men, have as free election, and as free spirits; we are compounded of like parts, and may with like liberty make benefit of our creations"—*she makes this affirmation cross-dressed*.²⁷ How are we to read this? As a classic instance of self-oppression—the woman can only conceive her equality by taking on masculine guise—or as a claim to equality made possible by a gender inversion which is simultaneously a demystification of sexual difference itself? Certainly the challenge works through the disclosure that gender difference is a social

construct. So the very emphasis on the constructedness of gender which, according to Neely, leads to the silencing of women in modern gender theory, in early modern England was the basis of a real challenge. And not only that: it might now suggest to us a creative perversity in desire itself.

Of course the theater had a particular investment in dress violation—not only because female parts were played by boys, but because actors playing the parts of those from superior classes also violated the dress codes of class. So the very devices of theater itself—artifice, cross-dressing, disguise, role-playing—not only facilitated exploration of the cultural construction of gender, its contradictions and injustices, but also enabled a disclosure of the connections between gender and class.

There recurs also in the numerous tracts attacking the theater, its dress and gender transgressions, a fear that men dressing as women will lead to an erosion of masculinity itself. Laura Levine in an informative article on this subject shows that these tracts, even as they confidently sermonize on the fixed nature of identity, especially gender identity as prescribed by God and signified through dress difference, display a deep anxiety that identity is *not* fixed, that, underneath, the self is really nothing at all.²⁸ Further, they feared that “doing” what a woman does (on the stage and in women’s clothes) leads to “being” what a woman is; the most troubling anxiety is that there is no essentially *masculine* self (136), and cross-dressing in women’s clothes can lead to a man “turning into” a woman. Once again—though now it is a fear rather than an affirmation—the constructed nature of gender was a perception of the period and not an anachronistic retrospective invention of criticism.

The frequent charge that the theater encouraged sodomy enters the discourse of the antitheatricalists as a focus for this very fear that gender difference is ever under threat of breakdown, and more generally, for the fear that “under the costume there is really nothing there or, alternatively, that what is there is something foreign, something terrifying and essentially other” (135). My own analysis differs from Levine’s, but her argument shows clearly how the preoccupation with sodomy is inseparable from the preoccupation with gender and, through gender, with human identity and the ordering of society. For these reasons we need to think about it.

Gender Critique, Cross-Dressing, and *Antony and Cleopatra*

Finally let me bring the foregoing together in an imagined production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, taking up the three issues of pleasure,

cross-dressing, and the interrogation of sexual difference. This imagined production has a history: first, it has learned from those like Charles Marowitz who think Shakespeare needs rewriting;²⁹ second, it seeks to celebrate some of the more liberating insights of gender politics; third, it agrees with Boose on the importance of pleasure in whatever it is that we do; fourth, it agrees with Ryan on the importance of liberating potential; fifth, it would like to escape the often deadening discourse we use to talk of sexuality; sixth, it risks provoking those (a) who frown in political correctness at the idea of the Hic Mulier figure declaiming the freedom of women in drag; (b) who can only proceed by clarifying the ambiguities like the one just uttered; (c) who appeal to sexual difference as a way of disavowing desires different to theirs, even as they fetishize the concept of difference; and (d) who thereby resist some of their own most challenging insights—who, in short, deploy a discourse shot through with the oppressiveness, not to say banality,³⁰ of gender.

Two of the issues dramatized in *Antony and Cleopatra* are sexual love and political struggle. In different words, desire and power. Provisionally and crudely, we can identify two recurring responses to the play: the romantic and the moralistic. Romantics have seen the play as being about a transcendent and noble love tragically destroyed in and by the treacherous, mundane world of power politics. Conversely, moralists have regarded that same love affair as dissipated and an abdication of moral and social responsibility. What is behind the romantic view is a relatively modern notion of sexual desire as potentially, if destructively, redemptive. Behind the moralist view is a secular version of a much older notion of desire as dangerous: in it human frailty is manifested.

In our own time the romantic view predominates over the moralistic. I'm tempted to risk a brief speculation on some of the reasons why this might be so. In our own time the realm of the aesthetic is often distinguished from the realm of the political. This was not so in the seventeenth century; literary and artistic culture was integrated with other kinds of knowledge and with civic and social life.³¹ If for us the aesthetic is split from the political, so too is the world of love, especially love as romantic and/or tragic. Conventionally, love is supposed to be contained within marriage and the family, that haven from a heartless world. More significantly, the same public/private distinction marks even romantic, radical, or transgressive visions of sexual desire. One need think only of the profoundly redemptive power of transgressive desire in the writing of D. H. Lawrence, and how it was this aspect of his work which made him so famous in the 1950s and 1960s. Redemptive: sexual

love, almost like art, can redeem us from the inadequacy of contemporary social realities so often epitomized in the destructive world of power and politics.

So the realm of the aesthetic shares with sexual love a detachment from the world of politics, and both have the potential to transcend that world and to redeem us within it. Such is the perspective from which *Antony and Cleopatra* has so often been read, from Dryden's adaptation onwards: the world well lost. It's a powerful conjunction: universal Shakespeare, redemptive love, transcendent aesthetics.

Today, when we are learning again what the Renaissance always knew about the inseparability of sexuality and power, art and politics, that perspective is losing credibility. We are becoming acutely aware that sexual desire is not that which transcends politics and power, but the vehicle of politics and power. Such is the case in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In *Radical Tragedy* I argued that in this play the language of desire, far from transcending the power relations which structure the world of the lovers, is wholly in-formed by those relations; that Antony's masculinity and sexuality are informed by the contradictions of the very history which is rendering him obsolete. What follows now is a brief recapitulation, and then a development of this reading.

When Cleopatra recalls the night she cross-dressed with Antony and took his sword (2.5.22–23), sexuality is seen to be rooted in a fantasy transference of power from the public to the private sphere. It is a creatively perverse transference—that is, one in which knowledge, transgression, and pleasure interweave. It is known for instance that Antony's sexuality is marked by insecurity. He is aging; he wants to prove that he is still the great warrior he once was. He is in homosocial competition with Caesar, whose youthfulness he several times remarks. When he wins a battle he sees his victory as a recovery of sexual prowess: "I will appear in blood" (3.13.174); "there's sap in't yet" (3.13.191); and, to Cleopatra:

leap thou, attire and all,
Through proof of harness to my heart, and there
Ride on the pants triumphing.

(4.8.14–16)

It's not difficult to see in all this the psychology of masculine sexual jealousy along with fantasies of sexual potency and anxieties of sexual impotence, and to be led to the conclusion that these three things, if not identical, are nevertheless inseparable. But perhaps more pertinent is that in Jacobean England the warrior or martial ideal was in decline. The military leader identified by honor and

courage was being disempowered, becoming obsolete as the state took over his powers, rather as the new political reality embodied in Caesar is displacing Antony. This “man of men” (5.1.72), this “lord of lords” (4.8.16), this “greatest prince o’ th’ world, / The noblest” (4.15.54–55), is becoming obsolete; the myth of martial omnipotence has served its day.

In other words a whole history informs Antony’s sexuality. We can see its effects in Cleopatra’s dream: “His legs bestrid the ocean: his reared arm / Crested the world” (5.2.82–83). Some critics have seen in this speech the transformation of human love into something almost divine. Others like Carol Neely find that it “enlarges and reconciles [Antony’s] sexuality and heroism.” She also says of this dream that it “completes” Enobarbus’s famous “Age cannot wither her” vision of Cleopatra, and, “In the two visions, female and male sexuality are seen as reciprocal opposites: infinite variety and eternal bounty, magnetic power and hyperbolic fruitfulness, stasis and motion, art and nature.”³² Kiernan Ryan includes Antony in his list of great Shakespearean protagonists “born before their time, citizens of an anticipated era . . . pointing us towards more desirable versions of human existence” (50). I respond in Antony to almost the opposite of what Neely and Ryan celebrate. Especially in Cleopatra’s dream: in death Antony becomes at last what he always wanted to be, larger than life. But in the valediction there is also invoked the commemorative statue, literally larger than life: his legs bestrid the ocean. Antony becomes statuesque in a way which recalls that the statue is a literal, material embodiment of a respect for its subject which is inseparable from the obsolescence of that subject. And isn’t this the apparent destiny of Antony in the play, one with which he colludes, self-sacrificially *and* pleasurably?

If a whole history does indeed inform Antony’s sexuality, it’s also true that he lives that history as a contradiction: his sexuality is structured by those very power relations which he is prepared to sacrifice for his sexual freedom—Rome for Egypt. Correspondingly, the omnipotence he wants to reaffirm in and through Cleopatra is almost entirely a function of the power structure which he is prepared to sacrifice for her. It’s a no-win scenario. But how to convey this in production?

Reading Margaret Lamb’s 1980 stage history of the play, we learn that in modern times the romantic view has predominated, at least in the theater, with the consequence that the production history of this play has been unusually conservative.³³ But there was a very different and rather notorious production of the play in London at the Bankside Globe in 1973, directed by Tony Richardson. It

was experimental and intended as a comment on international power politics. According to Lamb, Caesar was made “at once a fascist blackshirt and a raging psychopath” (170) and delivered some of his lines like a “salivating necrophiliac” (171). Cleopatra though, played by Vanessa Redgrave, became “a decadent imperialist in a red wig, orange sunglasses and white pants suit [who] reeled drunkenly on three-inch heels [and] threw coke bottles at flunkies” (170). Antony, played by Julian Glover, “was a dandyish, cigar-smoking subaltern in khakis,” so effutely narcissistic that when in distress he was given to falling over (170).

I am sorry not to have seen this production. But, envious as I am of those three-inch heels, and sure as I am that this is the one performance of Antony which could have stirred me to empathy, it is not quite what I had in mind. In England people do not understand decadence; they always moralize it, even or especially the radicals. The fact is, such “political” interpretations of the play are only fashionable versions of the moralistic view. As such they do not even begin to do justice to Cleopatra. She is, to be sure, both problematic and perverse. Notoriously though, critics, directors, and actors have resolved the problem in ways misogynist and racist.³⁴ She is not so much decadent as camp. I want to argue that the key to a modern production of this play has to be camp, but a camp far removed from its ineffectual stereotype in the theater and Englit.

In the mundane (royal) sense of the word, Cleopatra is only one of many queens; in the derogatory (sexual) sense, she is (in the eyes of those who would use it, though not in mine) maligned. In the most interesting, camp sense of the word, Cleopatra is the first great queen of the English stage, camping it up outrageously, histrionic from beginning to end. She’s over the top, she wears her desire on her sleeve; she knows the profound truth of camp, the “deep” truth of the superficial: if it’s worth doing, it’s worth over-doing.

I find Cleopatra’s performance utterly winning. When the messenger comes to her in act 2 scene 5 she throws money at him in order to get him to say what she wants him to say. Actually it’s even better than that: she throws money at history, trying to bribe it into a change of mind, treating it with the contempt it deserves. And of course she is right to beat the messenger. If he hasn’t yet learned that it’s his job to bring good news, he deserves to be beaten. Others of Cleopatra’s attendants are much wiser. Alexas camps it up with her, nicely implicating Antony as well:

Last thing he did, dear Queen,
 He kissed—the last of many doubled kisses—
 This orient pearl. His speech sticks in my heart.
(1.5.39–41)

Between them they truly make a scene. Here as so often, camp revels in a desire it simultaneously deconstructs, becoming a form of theatrical excess which both celebrates and undermines what it mimics. Thus Cleopatra with exalted love.

For desire to be seen as redemptive it has to be seen to work in terms of our deepest inner being—what Antony calls his “full heart” (1.3.43). It is this full heart which desire both flows from and redeems. It is also this full heart which camp subverts through parody. In short, camp *hollows out sentiments even as it exaggerates and intensifies them*: “Eternity was in our lips and eyes, / Bliss in our brows bent” (1.3.35–36). This is not the voice of transcendent love, but the inflated rhetoric of camp: an extravagance which parades and delights in its own hollowness, and which satisfies our desire for the sentimental but by reveling in rather than disavowing its shallowness. Once we have learned to delight in the charade of the sentimental, we can never again be genuinely, which is to say tediously, sentimental. Camp is one further means whereby the artifice of the theater is turned back upon what it represents; the natural is shown to be a pose without style—a deeply inadequate condition indeed.

Camp also thrives on bathos. Antony, dying, asks Cleopatra to descend the monument for the last of “many thousand kisses” (4.15.20). “I dare not, dear,” she retorts, “lest I be taken” (4.15.21–23). It’s not death she fears but being forced to participate in Caesar’s victory parade. Of course she’s right: appearances matter. Cleopatra knows that it is only the shallow who do *not* judge by appearances. “*I am dying*” cries Antony, “let me speak a little” (4.15.41–42). “No,” retorts Cleopatra, “let *me* speak” (4.15.43); and she does, splendidly: she will, she says, rail so high, “That the false huswife Fortune [will] break her wheel, / Provoked by my offence” (4.15.44–45). She puts on her robe and crown to die; in so doing she not only lives, but dies according to that wonderful observation of Oscar Wilde, “in all important matters, style not sincerity is the vital thing.”³⁵

But how to get this across, how to displace all that tedious earnestness which so often dominates our discussion and production of this play? Well, I’m told that Leslie Fiedler once made a brilliant suggestion; he said there was only one actress who was really adequate to the part of Cleopatra, and that was Mick Jagger. It’s a nice

thought. But he would be too expensive. Even so, we could foreground the camp by going back to Jacobean theatrical practice and have a boy play the part, though more sympathetically than Cleopatra envisages: "I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I'th' posture of a whore." (5.2.219–21). My own candidate for the part would be either Peter Stallybrass of the University of Pennsylvania or, if he's tied up—and he often is—then Gary Taylor, editor of the Oxford Shakespeare.

I can see only one objection to this: there would be one less part for a woman. No matter: in my production Antony would be played by a woman—ideally Marjorie Garber of Harvard. In fact all male roles would be played by women. Of course there would have to be other changes: the last four scenes would be rewritten so that Cleopatra would have a same-sex but cross-class affair with one of her women attendants, while there would be much more (sympathetic) attention to Antony's masochism and the obsolescence of his particular brand of masculinity, as a result of which he would become paranoid, convinced that he was being pursued by a sodomitish Caesar. So what others have seen as a limitation of this theater (the boy-actress), I would in this case recover as a strength: the woman playing Antony and the boy playing Cleopatra would subvert the very idea of sexual difference and sexual identity upon which the romantic, the moralistic, the sexist, the racist, and the decadent interpretations all at some stage rely. If anyone would like to hire my services as director, let me encourage them with the immodest assurance that in this as all else, I'm both versatile and cheap.

SUSSEX UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1 See *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore (Manchester, 1985).

2 Carolyn Porter, "Are We Being Historical Yet?" *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 87 (1988), 743–86; Louis Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. A. Veenser (New York, 1989), pp. 15–36; Don Wayne, "Power, Politics, and the Shakespearean Text: Recent Criticism in England and the United States," and Walter Cohen, "Political Criticism of Shakespeare," both in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion O'Connor (London, 1987), pp. 47–67 and 18–46, respectively; and Karen Newman, "Renaissance Family Politics and Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*," *English Literary Renaissance*, 16 (1986), 86–100.

3 Howard Horowitz, "'I Can't Remember': Skepticism, Synthetic Histories, Critical Action," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 87 (1988), 787–820, 803. Horowitz is making

specific reference to Marguerite Waller's "Academic Tootsie: The Denial of Difference and the Difference it Makes," *Diacritics*, 17 (1987), 2–20.

4 See Lynda E. Boose, "The Family in Shakespeare Studies; or—Studies in the Family of Shakespeareans; or—the Politics of Politics," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 40 (1987), 707–42; Carol Thomas Neely, "Constructing the Subject: Feminist Practice and the New Renaissance Discourses," *English Literary Renaissance*, 18 (1988), 5–18; Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (Hempstead, 1989); hereafter cited in text.

5 As does Ryan (see below, pp. 480–81) but not Boose; since I'll be concentrating in what follows on my disagreement with Boose, I want to acknowledge a debt to this politically sensitive and intellectually challenging article. Boose's account of the importance within the United States academy of what she calls the first generation feminists is an exemplary instance of cultural history. Having learned from Boose more about the historical conditions in which that feminist work emerged and which helped form its political objectives, I'm persuaded that subsequent criticism of this work underestimated its importance in the United States academy at that time.

6 Neely's article is a wide ranging attack on most current forms of "theory," including deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis. That all theory is not necessarily antifeminist is self-evident. The tensions as well as the enabling connections between feminism and various kinds of theory are helpfully explored in a recent issue of *Feminist Studies*, 14, No. 1 (1988).

7 See p. 728. Actually in recent work on the Renaissance, materialist and otherwise, I see rather little attention to class and even less to race. Rather than simply invoking the inseparable triad—I'm told that in some quarters "race class and gender" is articulated as one word—I want to acknowledge Ania Loomba's *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester, 1989), one of the few studies I know which does address the interrelationship between race and gender in the Renaissance. That Loomba takes a play like *Othello* as her starting point indicates precisely the extent to which race has been ignored, including by feminists.

8 See Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Brighton, 1983); and Kathleen McLuskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*," in Sinfield and Dollimore; hereafter cited in text.

9 Jacqueline Rose, "Sexuality in the Reading of Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*," in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London, 1985), pp. 95–118.

10 See Jonathan Dollimore, "Transgression and Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*," in Sinfield and Dollimore, pp. 72–87.

11 Barbara Babcock, *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca, 1978), p. 32.

12 Neely, p. 10. See Stephen Greenblatt, "Fiction and Friction," in his *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 66–93.

13 Other critics, following an apparently emerging consensus fed by its own momentum rather than by attention to the work being criticized, have similarly misrepresented the essays in *Political Shakespeare*. I point out two, chosen because they relate directly to this discussion of gender, but also because in virtually every other respect I can recommend them as two of the best articles yet published on the controversies raised by new historicism and cultural materialism. The first is Walter Cohen's "Political Criticism of Shakespeare" (see above, n. 2), the second Judith Newton's "History as Usual?: Feminism and the 'New Historicism,'" *Cultural Critique*, 9 (1988), 87–121. Cohen includes the introduction to *Political Shakespeare* in a body of work which he describes as "treating feminism obliquely or not at all" (p. 22);

Newton says of the same piece that it subsumes feminism to cultural materialism (p. 106). In fact the introduction describes cultural materialism as growing out of other movements, including "some of the major developments in feminism" (pp. 2–3). In a discussion of feminist criticism of the period, specifically McLuskie's contribution to the book, the introduction also observes: "a materialist feminism, rather than simply coopting or writing off Shakespeare, follows the unstable construction of, for example, gender and patriarchy back to the contradictions of their historical moment" (p. 11). More significantly, Newton here ignores the very article in *Political Shakespeare* (McLuskie's) most relevant to her subject—viz. the relations between materialism and feminism. Other essays from *Political Shakespeare* which are concerned with gender are also ignored. In short—and this is my reason for raising the issue here—there seems to be a rather exclusive notion at work as to what counts as gender critique.

14 See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, tr. Richard Miller (New York, 1975).

15 Ruth Karras, "The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14 (1989), 426.

16 Dollimore, "Transgression and Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*," p. 85.

17 Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (London, 1979), p. 192. The criticisms which Williams makes of Brecht might also be directed at E. J. Burford's three studies of prostitution in the Renaissance: *Bawds and Lodgings: A History of the London Bankside Brothels* (London, 1976); *The Orrible Synne: A Look at London Lechery from Roman to Cromwellian Times* (London, 1973); and *Queen of the Bawds* (London, 1974). The literature on prostitution is growing and varied. In addition to the already mentioned article by Ruth Karras, I've space to recommend two others, both by Lyndal Roper: "Discipline and Respectability: Prostitution and the Reformation in Augsburg," *History Workshop Journal*, 19 (1985), 3–28, and "Will and Honor: Sex, Words and Power in Augsburg Criminal Trials," *Radical History Review*, 43 (1989), 45–71.

18 Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Love's Cure*, in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, 1976), III, 4.2.50–54.

19 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974), 5.1.78, 85–86; all subsequent references to Shakespeare will be to this volume, hereafter cited in text.

20 See Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (Edinburgh, 1987).

21 It is described in Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, 1976).

22 Martin Jay, "Hierarchy and the Humanities: The Radical Implications of a Conservative Idea," *Telos*, 62 (Winter 1984–85), 131–44.

23 George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York, 1967), p. ix.

24 See Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy* (Chicago, 1984).

25 Richard Wilson, "Beyond the Pale: Renaissance Writing and the New Historicism," rev. of *Radical Tragedy*, by Jonathan Dollimore, *Literature and History*, 14 (1988), 213.

26 The new introduction to the second edition of *Radical Tragedy* (Brighton, 1989) gives a fuller account of this work.

27 *Haec-Vir*, reproduced in facsimile in *Hic Mulier: Or, the Man-Woman and Haec-Vir: Or, The Womanish-Man* (London, 1620; rpt. Exeter, 1973), Sig. B3.

28 See Laura Levine, "Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization from 1579–1642," *Criticism*, 28 (1986), 126, 128; hereafter cited in text.

29 On this see Alan Sinfield, "Making Space: Appropriation and Confrontation in Recent British Plays," in *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. Graham Holderness (Manchester, 1988), pp. 128–44.

- 30 See Simon Watney's cogent attack on the banality of gender in an essay of that name in *Oxford Literary Review*, 8 (1986), 13–21.
- 31 See Kevin Sharpe and Stephen Zwicker, *Politics of Discourse* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 4–5.
- 32 Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven, 1985), pp. 159, 160.
- 33 Margaret Lamb, *Antony and Cleopatra on the English Stage* (London, 1980), p. 172; hereafter cited in text.
- 34 See Linda Woodbridge [L. T. Fitz], "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in *Antony and Cleopatra* Criticism," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 28 (1977), 297–316.
- 35 Oscar Wilde, *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (1894), in *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. G. F. Maine (New York, 1954), p. 1113.