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Shakespeare's World and Crisis: Dilemmas of a Scholarly Representation

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To the memory of Géza Kállay

The specific context and starting point of my investigation is a pragmatic task I am involved in as member of a group of researchers writing the new history of English literature in Hungary, a long due update of the last such literary history, dating back to the socialist era of the 1970s.¹ The whole undertaking has been, and still is a crucial and formative experience for several of us, Hungarian scholars of English literature and culture, mostly teachers at diverse Hungarian universities, but also professors abroad, or doctoral students, or secondary school teachers with research background and doctoral degrees. The project has become important for us specifically because it forced us to think and talk much more thoroughly and explicitly than usual about what we actually *do* as researchers and *why*. One important experience is to realize that the writing of the actual text – which is at present in its final stages – took about as much time as discussing the preferred organizational concept that was to be followed when planning the chapters. From the outset it was clear that it would not be merely a History of English Literature, but rather the Hungarian version of it, and that this specific perspective would also be acknowledged in the title of the volumes. The potential audience of the text is imagined to be anyone from the range of secondary school or university students to the knowledgeable wider public. The term “Hungarian” in the title of the volumes, as the reference to the perspective, provides at least two things: both a guideline and a sense of liberation. A guideline meaning that chapters are sensitive to topics and works with a Hungarian reception history and their role in Hungarian literature and culture. Such issues, to take some Shakespearean

¹ I submitted an earlier version of this paper to the “Renaissance Afterlives Revisited” seminar of the SAA in Atlanta, 2017. I am grateful to all the seminar participants for their useful comments and suggestions, especially Jennifer Low and Monique Pittman.

examples, would include the role played by translations of Shakespeare's dramas in the second half of the 19th century – similarly to other Central European translations in the same era – in creating a renewed literary language, and a nation that viewed such translations as their entry ticket to the elite club not only of European literature, but of intellectually refined and powerful European nations. It would also include the significance of productions of Shakespearean history plays in being able to comment on the tyrants and their methods of rule in socialist regime – sometimes against the explicit wish of the direction.² As for the sense of liberation created by the avowedly “here-and-now” perspective of the project: rather than endeavoring the impossible task of “covering the whole picture” by mentioning major authors and works as in an annotated phone book, importantly, authors were asked to follow their own interest, giving greater or smaller significance to works, authors, genres or phenomena as they see them fit. Clearly, this subjective viewpoint has been combined with the more comprehensive editorial perspectives already when titles of chapters and subchapters were set, but authors were nevertheless urged to focus on issues they find important, things that are relevant for them, and *as* they are relevant for them beyond the fact that they are potential items of a literary history.

In the present essay I wish to discuss some of the more general, theoretical issues that this undertaking raises, particularly as the co-author of the chapter on the questions of periodization in connection with the Renaissance as an era, with the working title “Changing images of the Renaissance after the cultural turn” [Változó Reneszánsz-képek a kulturális fordulat után]. When deciding on the changing images that should be included here, at least two contexts have to be taken into consideration. One context is the changing images of the

² Interesting examples are presented by Schandl (2009: 16-19), a particularly noteworthy one being a renewed production of *Richard III* in the early 1950s, which unexpectedly appeared to refer too strongly to the then ruling oppressive regime.

Renaissance as they both influenced and were entailed by changing interpretations of works regarded as key texts of Renaissance English literature in English-speaking discourses. The other context is the change of the image of the (English) Renaissance, due to paradigmatic shifts in scholarship. This latter notion is doubly relevant in the Hungarian contexts, bringing radical changes in the interpretations of the era by the fall of the socialist regime, and the consequent influence of the finally free and open influx of intellectual schools and scholarly trends, including the ones that can be considered under the umbrella of the “cultural turn”. As for the first context, the main question is: how did some new interpretations of works re-shape the understanding of the period that bore them?³ Another important issue is to raise the question of the significance of the introduction of the term *Early Modern* as an alternative to the *Renaissance*, as well as the debates about the relationship between the Medieval and the Renaissance. To remain with the example of Shakespeare, the epitome of renaissance (or early modern) literature, scholarship within the past decade has witnessed significant revaluations of this image, pointing to the crucial “medievalness” of Shakespeare.⁴ An earlier revaluation, with the rise of New Historicism, was the change in which the Tillyardean, highly aestheticized and idealized image of the Renaissance order, in which the macrocosmic universe was reflected in the microcosmic human being, was discredited. Scholars pointed out the related problem, namely that the idea of the worldview as such postdated the Elizabethans “like photography, by more than two hundred years” (de Grazia, 1997: 8). Also, as de Grazia suggests by referring

³ In this sense, say, Jonathan Dollimore’s interpretation of *King Lear* in *Radical Tragedy* (1984) would make a more abrupt shift from the image of renaissance humanism with its fierce insistence on the lack of meaning in human suffering than Catherine Belsey’s *The Subject of Tragedy*, an equally groundbreaking volume on the understanding of the role tragedies played in the formation of the modern subject, which nevertheless is still more in line with a general understanding of the Renaissance as the period when the modern individual was born.

⁴ As Helen Cooper says about the topic of her monograph entitled *Shakespeare and the Medieval World* (2010), “Although we think of Shakespeare as quintessentially belonging to the English Renaissance, his world was still largely a medieval one.” Available at <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/shakespeares-medieval-world>. Access: 21-09-2018.

to authors considered to be major figures of the cultural turn (Foucault or Althusser): “The days of uniform, coherent, and comprehensive historical pictures seem to be over” (ibid.). Rather than examining the way in which literary works could be interpreted with the help of contemporary notions of a cosmic order, New Historicist’s interests tended towards tracing the dialogue between the literary texts and the social discourse. As Drakakis and Fludernik (1984: 499) explain,

Old (literary) Historicism treated nonliterary sources as materials that provided explanatory support for interpretations on the basis of facts about the cultural environment (Levin 1990); New Historicism, by contrast, takes the cultural discourses to be central and concentrates on how they are reflected in literature, which is thus demoted to a status of being merely one of the many cultural artifacts existing at a particular moment in time.

“Cultural discourse”, thus, seems to replace the idea of a less flexible and more clear-cut image of a world picture, but its explanatory function is not entirely different. De Grazia argues, however, that once the term world picture is replaced by other, apparently more fashionable terms, such as “systems of representations”, “cognitive mappings” or “fantasy-constructions”, we may wonder whether “[i]t is possible (...) that ideology might have slipped into the place of world pictures as a way of thinking about cultures of the past?”. I am not sure about the extent to which the playful ambiguity of this question is intentional. Clearly, the terms quoted here that work almost as synonyms for world pictures come from scholars who are interested in the ideological constructions governing past discourse – de Grazia’s footnotes identify the phrases as coming from Althusser, Geertz and Zizek (de Grazia, 1997: 21). There is, however, another meaning of the sentence referring to ideologies slipping in as a way of thinking about past cultures, which is perhaps even more relevant to the undertaking of writing a literary history. The elephant in the room is the ideology slipping into and shaping the project itself. Paradoxically, a strictly New Historicist paradigm almost seems to undermine any literary historical narrative by avoiding diachronic analysis and pointing to the blurred line

between literary and nonliterary texts (cf. Drakakis / Fludernik 2014: 500). The relevance of this second, perhaps unintended meaning of de Grazia's sentence for the specific Hungarian literary history is made tangible by the work to which the presently written text, the *History of English Literature from a Hungarian Perspective* (the verbatim, but slightly misleading translation of the title would be *The Hungarian History of English Literature*) wishes to be a now acceptable alternative. That other book, the last comprehensive one of the kind up until today, published in the early seventies, surely exemplifies this other, less obvious meaning of ideologies slipping in, while we are thinking about the past.⁵ The turn that shaped the changing image of the Renaissance in Hungary drastically, and was indeed the prerequisite of the cultural turn, was ultimately the fall of the socialist regime.

The History of English Literature (Az angol irodalom története), edited by Miklós Szenczi, Tibor Szobotka and Anna Katona and published in Budapest, 1972, as all academic works of the period, bears the signs of the then ruling socialist ideology. Usual ways to comply with the official requirements were to insert (sometimes barely or not at all) relevant quotations in the text from the main ideological figures, mainly Marx and Engels, and once the mandatory tribute to the fathers was paid, the endeavor was authorized and the investigation could go on. The case with the English Renaissance, however, was more specific, precisely because it plays such an important role in Marx's own writing: for him it is the English Renaissance that is, on the one hand, the dawn of capitalism, while on the other hand it is also the first step towards the ultimate liberation of the worker. At the dawn of the Renaissance workers gain freedom from the feudal ties. This significance is certainly not played down in Szenczi and his colleagues' literary history (see also de Gracia 1997: 11-12), in which one can find long

⁵ It is useful to think of Hayden White's term "emplotment", referring to the genre of the narrative retelling of the past, that ultimately shapes its representation (White, 1973: X).

passages paraphrasing the relevant, 24th chapter of Marx's *The Capital*. A sentence exemplifying what they (were required to) say about the perspective of their undertaking is the following:

In the present chapter we wish to map out the most important literary and human values of the English Renaissance, but not for a moment should we forget about the gloomy events analyzed by Marx, the new, enslaving powers of capitalism that were active along with the liberation from feudal ties, and the enormous inner tension that lends a peculiar intensity to the intellectual life and literature of the English Renaissance, and which operates most clearly in the conflicts of drama" (Szenczi *et al.* 1972: 58. Transl. mine).

As a consequence, the literary heroes of the era will be figures who may be representatives of Renaissance humanism, but have to be at the same time critics of the emerging bourgeois class, or at least have to be dissociated from groups that are regarded as responsible for the rise of capitalism. Shakespeare, for example, fits well in this category as well as Thomas More. The former did clearly achieve individual material and social success, for which he may be criticized, still, he "was anything but obtuse in a bourgeois sense" (*idem*, 119). The latter may have been a deeply religious man, testifying to his beliefs through martyrdom, but he still condemned "the inhumanity of Christian Europe", which redeems him according to the authors' perspective. In fact, it is his work that saves him ultimately, being more progressive than the author himself: More who was imagined to have been "ideologically lagging behind the citizens of Utopia" may have "believed in the superiority of revelatory religion", but still contrasted the "rationally designed state of wise and sober pagans with the ignorant, superstitious and greedy communal spirit of the Christian England" of his time (*idem*, 67).

I would like to remark here that although I am singling out some of the most ideologically loaded passages from the work, my aim is neither to ridicule the scholarly value of Szenczi's and his colleagues' undertaking, nor to make an impression that this is all that there is. In their time, in the confinement of the ideological era they worked, there was simply

no other way to view the English Renaissance, at least not in an officially published literary history. Was there an opinion that would reflect what Szenczi and his colleagues *really* thought? Our dilemma, however, is certainly the one that is raised by the liberation from the ideological constraints: if the backdrop disappears that has made certain literary works significant in specific ways, what criteria will define the significance of the same or other, previously neglected works? The answer to this question regarding the case of the reinterpretation of the English Renaissance after the fall of the regime in Hungary may be looked for in a volume edited by Attila Kiss and György Endre Szőnyi (1998). English Renaissance literature may become significant for the reason it is significant in the English speaking discourse: new historicism. Ten years after the political change, a complete issue of *Helikon*, a journal of literary studies, was dedicated to new historicism, with translations of some seminal articles, reviews of related volumes and a bibliography of new historicism, as well as articles by the two editors. Szőnyi republished a text he had written a decade before, based on what he recounts as his shocking encounter with the new trends in Renaissance studies in the US at the end of the 1980s – one element of this shock surely being the fact that while Hungarian academia had finally got rid of the Marxist baggage, leftist literary theories were becoming increasingly powerful in the US. An important moral from reading his article today, in 2018 is that at the time of publishing the article he still imagines his position of a Hungarian scholar of the English Renaissance as of someone who can decide the extent to which the western trends may or may not be useful or invigorating within the Hungarian intellectual arena. It seems to me that this perspective has disappeared partly because of the globalization of academia, partly because of what may be called semi-jokingly “self-colonization” into English speaking discourses, and partly because the valid academic system by which scholarly output is measured rates foreign (and foreign language) publications higher than domestic ones.

The ideological constraints of the past are long gone, but new ones emerged instead. The new literary history project, in this sense, is an exceptional territory for potential experimentation: what do we want the English Renaissance to be?⁶ Do we see the milestones, the values which govern us in constructing its image, here and now, and are there perhaps some that we would rather have instead?

As a partial and rather philosophical answer to this above question, two quotations can serve as guidelines. One is from Szenczi's literary history, on Thomas More, while the other is by a Hungarian scholar, researcher at the Hungarian Academy, specializing in the European Renaissance, Pál Ács.

[Thomas More's] last work, reminiscent of Boethius, entitled *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* was written before his execution, during his imprisonment. Two Hungarian noblemen are debating, on the eve of the Mohács battle [lost against the army of the Ottoman Empire in 1526], how to prepare for martyrdom, in case the Turk occupies the country. The reference to Henry VIII's tyrannical despotism and to More's own fate is obvious; but equally clear is the reference (...) to the catastrophic consequences of the dissolution of European unity (ibid. 71.).

The fear of the dissolution of the European unity, Hungary's image of a country that is at the border of Christianity, as well as the threatening image of a Muslim invasion – ideas known from contemporary political and ideological battles that crucially affect not only our Hungarian everyday life but also our common European, and indeed, global future – cannot be more topical today. Denying that our scholarly and academic interpretations and representations of the Renaissance are embedded in or contribute to the reproduction, questioning and replacing of contexts that ultimately define our world view would be futile. Such interpretations also define who we become, or choose to become through them. This

⁶ A complete issue of the journal of the Literary Theory Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, *Filológiai Közlöny* (2013/4), has been dedicated to discussing theoretical issues in connection with specific chapters of the new Hungarian version of the History of English Literature with articles by Géza Kállay (editor of the whole project), Péter Dávidházi, Attila Atilla Kiss, Zsolt Komáromy, Andrea Tímár, István D. Rácz, Tamás Bényei and Judit Friedrich. I was especially influenced by Attila Kiss' and Tamás Bényei's formulation of the literary history project being an "intervention".

perhaps gives us an opportunity to go a step further compared to the position of Presentism, the critical approach that offers itself as an alternative to New Historicism,⁷ and not only engage with our own ‘situatedness’ as something that is given, but rather see the performative responsibility in the consequences of *how* we see it. To illustrate my point, another, longer quotation, on the interpretation of the Renaissance, taken from an interview by Pál Ács, may serve us as a point of reference on the actuality of the debates about the meaning of the Renaissance:

We all know that the widely spread knowledge about ‘the renaissance era, the renaissance man’ were not created in the 15th-16th century, but in the 19th, and they are not so much the reflections of Petrarca’s, Ficino’s or Michelangelo’s world view, as they are of Michelet, Voigt and Burckhardt, in other words they are the modern European bourgeoisie’s own image, projected back into a period preceding them a few hundred years. This is precisely why several people deny that the Renaissance era was the age of the ‘early new era, or Early Modern’, and their understanding is that all these centuries, as they are, belong to the Middle Ages, and lack any modernity whatsoever. I cannot accept this, although I know very well how strong the medieval ties of the Renaissance were. I am not referring to well-known facts that clearly prove that European culture changed radically in the 15th-16th centuries, and a whole new word opened. Similarly, I am not pointing to the radically new forms and ways of seeing in the arts and literature that the Renaissance brought forth – following the models of Antiquity – first in Italy, and later in the whole of Europe, including Hungary. I would rather like to voice a hunch, according to which recent attacks against the Renaissance may be related to even more aggressive accusations against the Enlightenment, and liberalism as its progeny. The idea of the Renaissance is indeed the brain-child of bourgeois thinking, and today it is rejected by those who reject liberalism in its entirety. I am a follower of liberalism, and, among several other reasons, this is one that fuels my interest in the Renaissance. (Petneházi, 2016. My translation.)

It seems to me that the contexts to be taken into consideration as defining our work as critics, as authors of chapters in a literary history, emerge on three planes. The most pragmatic and materially constraining one is defined by the institutions that make our academic work possible. A non-poetic reason for our specific literary history project is that one of the biggest, regular funds available for research in Hungary is open for what is called “primary research”,

⁷ See Hugh Grady, an editor of *Presentist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2007) complaining (1996: 4-5) about the overwhelming power of the historicizing discourse: At present, the trend toward historicizing Shakespeare appears to have become so dominant in the field and therefore so highly valued that more ‘presentist’ approaches – that is, those oriented towards the text’s meaning in the present, as opposed to ‘historicist’ approaches oriented to meanings in the past – are in danger of eclipse. (Introduction: A Postmodernist Shakespeare In Shakespeare’s Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996), 4-5. See also Evelyn Gajowski: Presentism has ... challenged the dominant theoretical and critical practice of reading Shakespeare historically. (‘Beyond historicism: presentism, subjectivity, politics’, *Literature Compass* 7/8 (2010): 675).

and in the humanities it is realized in the form of databases or editions of primary sources. There are currently several such database projects, including ones that are similar in scale to our literary history. To mention only two, one is collecting data on all Hungarian theatre productions after 1949, while the other deals with the social history of Hungarian film, tagging all extant films in a grandiose database according to complex criteria. These projects are maintained in spite of the fact that the funding logic allows little room for connection between the goals that the funds can be allocated for, and the people who are actively working on the project.

The other plane emerges as the ideological context of the critical paradigm within which we operate, but it is not always easy to differentiate it from the third, performative one, related to the larger goals the critic wishes to achieve within a given social context – as in Pál Ács' case. A very different approach compared to the Socialist Hungarian literary history, but also influenced, by Marxist materialist criticism, is Terry Eagleton's. His position and his relation to New Historicism provide us with perspectives that add further nuance to the scrutiny of the role of literary critics. In their introduction to the volume *Beyond New Historicism* (2014: 495), Drakakis and Fludernik say the following: "Eagleton was, and continues to be, concerned to advance the cause of a particular theoretically informed materialist critical practice that the turbulent upheavals of late capitalism have reinforced rather than challenged." (495). In an article published in the early nineties, Aram Veese (1991) supports New Historicism against Terry Eagleton's criticism by saying, "Eagleton wants, obviously, to empower the human subject and feels cheated that New Historicism won't help him do it". By way of an illuminating example, Drakakis and Fludernik (idem, 495) compare Eagleton's two opinions on the witches of *Macbeth*, one published in 1986, and the other about a decade and a half later, in 2010. The witches are central to both readings, but while the earlier opinion celebrates the

freedom they represent,⁸ the later one stresses the threat posed by the witches to any social order (Eagleton 2010: 81). The two opinions of the same author seem inconsequential: should we, then, celebrate the witches' freedom or be afraid of them and oppose them? At the same time, these opinions also epitomize the ambiguous relationship between literary texts and the (ideological) context that surrounds them. Although New Historicists have convincingly shown how literary and non-literary texts are similar in their contribution to the circulation of power and social energy, and all types of texts are similarly constrained by the discourse allowing them in the first place, it is rather literary than non-literary texts where threats to order can be both subtle and powerful, represented in the way the witches are in *Macbeth*. A threat in itself is powerful precisely because it offers an alternative to the dominant power. The element identical to the "witches" in More's *Dialogue of Comfort*, the Turks, are a similar threat to order, and although I imagine that More's belief in the necessity of order was incomparably stronger than Eagleton's, and in his own martyrdom he saw a radical possibility to maintain it, he could still make his work function just like the witches do, and make his dialogue be the "Turk" threatening the system – in other words, the threat to the validity of the political order maintained by Henry VIII's court. Thus, he could also maintain a sense of freedom from ruling ideological constraints through literature, similar to the 1986 version of Eagleton's witches, while in King Henry's point of view More would constitute the threat to order, and not even his execution could have been enough for a complete eradication. Artistic freedom and political freedom are not easy to distinguish here, and it is similarly difficult to say whether containment is successful if we expand the context beyond the immediate material one to another beyond it, in which More certainly believed when offering an alternative literary and political truth in

⁸ "A realm of non-meaning and poetic play which hovers at the work's margins, one which has its own kind of truth" (Eagleton 1986: 2).

his *Dialogue*. It is noteworthy to see how Greenblatt, the founding father of New Historicism, comes to view the power of Shakespeare's artistic autonomy as detached from the historical circumstances in a similar fashion in *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Greenblatt 2010). As Drakakis and Fludernik observe (2014: 497), "[w]hat Greenblatt is in danger of succumbing to in *Shakespeare's Freedom* (...) is drifting away from the very overdetermining power of 'history' that New Historicism originally claimed to be the cornerstone of its practice". Since then, Greenblatt has published a monograph on Shakespeare's tyrants (2018) with so obviously presentist overtones as would have been impossible to combine with a historicist stance a decade or two ago. Eagleton and Greenblatt may seem inconsequential, since in different stages of their career they have offered different truths about Shakespeare or suggested different things about the way Shakespeare's texts function within the contemporary and contemporaneous contexts. But should we really think that their task is to *decide* whether the witches, in the end, are positive or negative, or whether Shakespeare's or anyone's artistic freedom is capable of surpassing the material and historical constraints of their context or not? According to the definition of the New Critics' aesthetic, ambiguity is a crucial characteristic distinguishing literary texts from nonliterary ones. A reformulation of this idea informed by New Historicism could be to say that by way of their freedom, literary texts – just like texts of literary criticism in contexts that are more fortunate and less constraining than the one of Szenczi and his colleagues – can tap into sources of social energy to help their community of readers engage with orders as well as threats to these in meaningful ways that are otherwise not readily available. By trying to entangle the co-dependency of scholarly facts and their interpretation, we may be dealing with a version of the Renaissance debate on the relationship between body and soul. Dissecting the body in the manner of Early Modern anatomists in the

hope to get closer to the soul,⁹ what emerges is the responsibility to make something of what we find or don't find there. And this responsibility relies equally on order as well as the freedom from its constraints. The question is not whether subversion is possible, but whether and when it is necessary.

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⁹ Cf. Attila Kiss's article in the present collection and in Kiss, 2011: 84-93.