

A New Historicism Study of Shakespeare's Historical Plays*

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Abstract—One of the distinctive features of Shakespeare's research in the new century is the study of his history plays in the perspective of New Historicism criticism. New Historicism scholars advocate bringing historical investigation into literary studies and point out that the relationship between literature and history is not foreground and background, but interaction and mutual influence. New Historicism scholars represented by Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose propose some important concepts such as "textuality of history", "historicity of text", "subversion" and "containment" to analyze and elaborate the relationship between literature and history. This paper intends to adopt these concepts in New Historicism to examine the connection and interaction between social political history and Shakespeare's history plays, thus providing insight into the profound influence of social and political history on Shakespeare and his works and the significance of his history plays in the social and political life of Shakespeare's era.

Keywords—Shakespeare; history plays; New Historicism

I. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is one of the most important playwrights and poets during the Renaissance period. During his lifetime, he created 38 plays, 154 sonnets, and 2 long narrative poems at least. Since the 17th century, his works have been translated into the major languages of the world, becoming one of the important channels for people to understand western literature and culture. In particular, his plays are still frequently performed even today and have been adapted into many other artistic forms such as movies since the silent era.

Shakespeare's plays have been traditionally divided by researchers into four categories: comedy, history, tragedy and romance. He has written ten histories (actually 11 if *Edward III* included) which can present the whole picture of the great history of England. The total ten histories are composed of two tetralogies and the other two histories, *King John* and *Henry VIII*. The first tetralogy includes *Henry VI* trilogy and *Richard III*, while *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* constitute the second tetralogy. These histories traverse England's medieval history from the coronation of King John in 1199 to the death of Henry VIII in 1547. They broadly and profoundly reflect the war,

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society and life of the English period from King John to Henry VIII. Hence, they are also called chronicles.

Shakespeare is one of the most prominent historical playwrights in English history. Not only does he depict many great historic events vividly in his history plays, but also shows the readers and the audience the prevailing political thoughts of that time. In a certain sense, Shakespeare's history plays exert an influence on the British history by means of direct or indirect participation in social and political life.

Since the 20th century, the modern Western Shakespeare studies have undergone a transformation from several research paradigms, from "Character Studies" through "Formalist Criticism" to "Historical Criticism". New Historicism has been in a striking position since the emergence in Western literary criticism in the 1980s.

The term "New Historicism" was coined by Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of New Historicism, but it was Louis Montrose who gave the more explicit theoretical definition. He put forward the core concept of New Historicism: "textuality of history" and "historicity of text", thus breaking the binary opposition between history and literature. The textuality of history means that historical texts have the characteristics of literary narratives, while the historicity of text means that literary texts participate in the construction of history. History and text are interdependent and intertextual. That is to say, literary, culture and history are in an interaction system. New Historicism holds that "literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text and context are mutually constitutive: they create each other... literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical context" (Tylson 186). Apart from Greenblatt and Montrose, other major representatives of New Historicism include Hayden White, Jonathan Dollimore, etc.

The first important work of Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, focuses on the English Renaissance works. He continued to study this in Shakespeare in subsequent works. It can be said that one of the most brilliant achievements of New Historicism is the promotion and innovation of the study of Renaissance play represented by Shakespeare's.

Based on the overseas and domestic research of New Historicism, this paper aims to discuss the core concepts about New Historicism in Shakespeare history plays, which are textuality of history, historicity of text, and the subversion and containment of power.

II. TEXTUALITY OF HISTORY

The New Historic school emphasizes that literary criticism should “return to history” and make great efforts in studying the connection between literature and history, and examining the status of ideology and politics in literary works. In the eyes of new historicists, all texts are “political tools” that are used to regulate social, political, and cultural relationships. In this sense, New Historicism has taken a further step compared with Historicism. Historicism holds that history is a set of facts that exist outside the text, providing a strong background for any given text, and the text is only the reflection of history. New Historicists oppose the simple division between text and history. They believe that literature is actively involved in a particular historical moment, not just passively reflecting history. It can be seen that the purpose of New Historicism’s reading is not to interpret the meaning and intention of literary texts, but to describe and test the language, culture, society and political structure of the past in details.

New historicism claims that history is a text, a story, and a narrative. This indicates that historical events exist only in the form of textual imprint. We can understand history in both textual form and in a textualized form. What we learn is not real historical events, but descriptive construction of historical events. In fact, in the course of historical revision, due to the different backgrounds and personal preferences, historians need to revise the disorderly events by means of exclusion, emphasis, and subordination. In this way, the same historical events may have completely different or even opposite meanings through different treatments. They carry the personal imprint of the historical creators.

Shakespeare’s first tetralogy ends with the defeat of the evil Richard III in the battle of Bosworth Field in 1485. The winner, Earl of Richmond, belongs to the House of Lancaster. He marries the Princess Elizabeth of the House of York, thus uniting the two nobles and ending the Rose War. Richmond is crowned King Henry VII and opens the Tudor dynasty.

Today, historians are still arguing about how the evil Richard III in the mouth of people really was, especially whether he personally ordered to kill the princes who were imprisoned in the Tower of London. But what is certain is that it was good for the Tudors to portray him as a tyrannical monarch. It was convenient to highlight his opponent, the future Henry VII, is a hero and a saint.

Richard’s stage image as a humpback villain is mainly from *History of King Richard III* (c.1513) written by Sir Thomas More. Because More was in charge of the literary work at the court of King Henry VIII, son of Henry VII, who defeated Richard in the Bosworth Field, he was vilifying Richard as much as possible in *History of King Richard III*.

Richard, the third son, of whom we now treat, was in wit and courage equal with either of them, in body and prowess far under them both: little of stature, ill featured of limbs, crooked-backed, his left shoulder much higher than his right, hard-favored in appearance, and such as is in the case of lords called warlike, in other men called otherwise. He was malicious, wrathful, envious, and from before his birth, ever perverse. It is for truth reported that the Duchess his mother had so much ado in her travail to birth him that she could not be delivered of him uncut, and he came into the world with the feet forward, as men be borne outward, and (as the story runs) also not untoothed.

In fact, the true image of Richard III may not be the case. Leonard F. Dean pointed out that the image of Richard III in More’s book is consistent, but the actual personality of Richard III is very complicated. The historians of later generations also gave an objective evaluation of Richard III’s performance as the monarch. Winston Churchill objectively affirmed Richard III’s political achievements in *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*, pointing out that Richard III’s life was frugal, the luxurious scene was restricted, the defeated political opponents were forgiven, and the poor petitions were taken care of.

In 2012, archaeologists at the University of Leicester finally confirmed a municipal parking lot as the Franciscan Church where Richard III was buried. In August of that year, they unearthed a skeleton of an adult male who apparently died in the war. Then, they passed scientific tests such as radiocarbon dating and determined that the deceased died between 1455 and 1540 and was about 20-30 years old. Finally, combined with historical data and by pairing with the DNA of Richard III’s descendants, they determined that they discovered the remains of Richard III. According to further research on the epiphysis, Richard III is very likely to die from a fatal blow to the head. His body is thin and his spine vertebrae do have a certain degree of curvature, which is consistent with the hunchback of Richard III in the historical description. However, no evidence of a shrinking arm or lameness has been found.

We can see that the narrative of history in More’s *History of King Richard III* is not neutral or objective. The strong points of Richard III are omitted and the physical defects are highlighted by Thomas More intentionally. Standing on his own position, More has made selection of historical materials, thus constructing a set of historical discourses that describe Richard III. The core of the discourses is deformity and evil. And more importantly, More’s history has received a lot of attention in the 16th century, and it has been one of the standards for compiling the history of England throughout the century. Therefore, the discourse of Richard III, constructed by More, is widely circulated and recurring in the historical texts of Hall and Holinshed.

Thomas More obtained a lot of information about Richard from Bishop Morton of Ely, a mortal enemy of Richard. More’s writings were incorporated into the main chronicles of the Tudor dynasty; Shakespeare may have read it through Edward Hall’s *Union of the Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and York* (1548). He may also have

referenced *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* of Holinshed or many other such chronicles.

In the creation of *Richard III*, Shakespeare absorbed and referenced the historical discourse constructed by Thomas More and grasped the characteristics of deformity and evil in the discourse. Richard is not only physically deformed, but also mentally distorted in the play.

At the very beginning of *Richard III*, Richard goes into a soliloquy.

*I, that am rudely stamped, and want love's
majesty*

*To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them —
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to see my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity.
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determin'd to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.*

(*Richard III*.1.1.16-31)

In fact, the literary discourse of Richard's deformity and evil has been established in the third part of his previous work *Henry VI*.

*To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub,
To make an envious mountain on my back,
Where sits deformity to mock my body;
To shape my legs of an unequal size,
To disproportion me in every part,
Like to a chaos or an unlicked bear-whelp,
That carries no impression like the dam.*

(*Henry V*, Part III.3.2.57-163)

*Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,
Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it.*

(*Henry VI*, Part III.5.6.78-79)

It can be seen that the "literary discourse" about Richard in the literary texts created by Shakespeare is consistent with the "historical discourse" written by Thomas More and others. Both of their cores are deformity and evil.

It is difficult to verify that Shakespeare only saw the historical materials that derogated Richard III at the time, but one thing is certain that the historical materials about Richard III is by no means only one type that Shakespeare referenced.

During the reign of Richard III, there was a bishop named Tomas Langton who said in a private letter to a missionary in September 1483 that Richard III was more able to meet the requirements of the common people than

any other king was. Many poor people who suffered from injustice were rehabilitated with his help. In many towns where he was going, he refused to accept the money sent to him. Bishop Tomas Langton never liked the character of Richard III, but thought that Richard III was sent by God to all people for the benefit of all.

Based on the previous history materials, Shakespeare only selected some of these materials according to his own principle and idea. In Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*, Richard is not the principle mastermind to cause the death of Duke of Clarence. There are at least two reasons causing Clarence's death, the Queen's hatred and Clarence's ambition to be king. While in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Clarence was imprisoned and executed because of Richard's conspiracy that had been planned previously.

*Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams,
To set my brother Clarence and the king
In deadly hate the one against the other.
And if King Edward be as true and just
As I am subtle, false and treacherous,
This day should Clarence closely be mewed up,
About a prophecy, which says that 'G'
Of Edward's heirs the murders shall be.*

...

*And, if I fail not in my deep intent,
Clarence hath not another day to live
(Richard III.1.1.32-40.152-153)*

In summary, the literary discourse constructed by Shakespeare further emphasizes the characteristics of Richard's deformity, ugliness, evil, and treacherousness. It is not only the history in More's *History of King Richard III* that has been textualized. The history in *Richard III* has also been textualized by Shakespeare's reconstruction.

III. HISTORICITY OF TEXT

In *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture*, Montrose explains the concept of "historicity of text" as the following, "By the 'Historicity of Texts', I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing-not only the text that critics study but also the texts in which they study them." It is not difficult to find that many political events of the time and various ideologies in Renaissance period have been reflected in Shakespeare's history plays. All the Shakespeare's plays about the king are centered on the issue of divine right of kings and the legitimacy of succession to the throne.

A. Divine Right of Kings

In Shakespeare's era, people widely accepted that the king's power to control the monarch was chosen by God. It was not controlled by the Christian Church and not influenced by the will of the masses. It is widely believed that in the history of the Tudor dynasty and the early Stuart dynasty that lived in Shakespeare, there were these authoritarian monarchs, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and James I. After the Pope rejected Henry VIII's request to divorce his

first wife, Henry VIII promulgated *the Act of Supremacy* in 1534, which marked the break of Henry VIII with the Catholic Church. Henry VIII became the leader of the British Church. Elizabeth I is also the leader of the British Church like her father. When James I became the King, he consolidated his power as a monarch by enacting laws and decrees, which was mainly reflected in his important work, *the True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598).

The political theories and creeds of these autocratic monarchs living in the Shakespeare era must influence Shakespeare's thoughts and his dramatic creations. The traditional belief of autocratic monarchy was clearly expressed in *Richard II*.

John of Gaunt refused to retaliate against Richard II for the death of his brother, because he was fully aware of the identity of the king as an agent of God.

*Heaven's is the quarrel, for heaven's substitute,
His deputy anointed in his sight,
Hath caused his death, the which if wrongfully,
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry arm against his minister.*
(*Richard II*.1.2.37-41)

Richard II himself also firmly believes that the power of King is from God.

*Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm from an anointed king;
The breadth of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord.*
(*Richard II*.3.2.49-52)

B. Legitimacy of Succession to the Throne

Another major problem facing Shakespeare's society is the succession of the throne, because the replacement of any monarch will inevitably bring about tremendous changes to the country. People used to believe that the throne should strictly abide by the hereditary system, but the devastation of Edward II greatly weakened this belief. The hereditary system of the throne was weakened increasingly till the rule of Henry VIII. Elizabeth's succession to the throne is debatable, because her grandfather, Henry VII usurped the throne. After she was crowned, she was not recognized by the Catholic Church. In addition, Queen Mary of Scotland was also a serious threat to the throne of Elizabeth, because Mary was recognized by Catholic Church. Elizabeth was unmarried for life and did not leave any heirs, which led to panic about the succession of the throne. Until later, the son of Queen Mary, James I, inherited the throne, also faced questions about the legitimacy of the throne. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why Shakespeare's history plays focuses on the legal status of the king and the issue of the succession of the throne.

In the two tetralogies written by Shakespeare, only Richard II has an absolutely legitimate succession to the throne. Henry IV usurped the throne from Richard II, which brought trouble to his son Henry V. Knowing that he was a

usurper, Henry IV believed that the prince's self-deprecation was the God's condemnation of him.

*I know not whether heaven will have it so,
For some displeasing service I have done,
That in his secret doom, out of my blood
He'll breed revengement and a scourge for me.
But thou dost in thy passage of life
Make me believe that thou art only marked
For the hot vengeance and the rod of heaven
To punish my mistreadings. ...*
(*Henry IV, Part I*.3.2.4-11)

He confessed his sins to his son before the death.

*Heaven knows, my son,
By what by-paths and indirect crooked ways
I met this crown, and I myself know well
How troublesome it sat upon my head.*
(*Henry IV, Part II*.4.5.321-324)

And Henry V also tried to make up for Richard II.

*I Richard's body have interr'd new,
And on it have bestowed more contrite tears
Than from it issued forc'd drops of blood.
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
Who twice a day their withered hands hold up
Toward heaven, to pardon blood, and I have built
Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do,
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon.*
(*Henry V*.4.1.251-261)

The illegitimacy of the succession of the throne of the Tudor dynasty is also reflected in the play of *Richard III*, in which bastardy plays a significant role. The illegitimate child problem becomes an important weapon for Richard to question the legal inheritance rights of his nephews. Richard orders Buckingham to spread the rumors that his brother and nephews are bastards.

*Go, after, after, cousin Buckingham.
The mayor towards Guildhall hies him in all post:
There, at your meetest vantage of the time,
Infer the bastardy of Edward's children:
...
Tell them, when that my mother went with child
Of that insatiate Edward, noble York
My princely father then had wars in France,
And by true computation of the time,
Found that the issue was not his begot —
Which well appeared in his lineaments,
Being nothing like the noble duke my father.*
(*Richard III*.3.5.2-92)

These two charges of bastardy pave Richard's way to the throne. And later in order to deal with his rival — Earl of Richmond, Richard uses bastardy as a weapon again. It is dangerous for the playwright himself to mention bastardy

charge in this play. Because the accusation that Richmond is an illegitimate child is equal to saying that the reign of Tudor is illegitimate, thus the identity of Queen Elizabeth is questionable. It can be said that Shakespeare's reference of bastardy issue alludes the illegitimacy of monarchs.

From the above analysis we find that Shakespeare's history plays were deeply influenced by the political and social factors at that time. Not only did they record the history, but also reflected the situation of the contemporary.

IV. THE SUBVERSION AND CONTAINMENT OF POWER

Foucault's greatest contribution to New Historicism lies in his account of power. He believes that at any historical stage, there is no direct confrontation between the authorities and their opposing forces, but a more complex process. Power is never a single whole, because power relations show different levels of power and its opposing forces.

Influenced by Foucault's analysis of power relations, Greenblatt puts forward the concepts of subversion and containment in his essay *Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, Henry IV and Henry V*. Subversion refers to questioning the social ideology that represents the order of ruling, so that the dissatisfaction of the general public can be vented, and containment is to control this subversion within the scope of permission, so that it cannot achieve substantial results. Rulers allow and encourage the coexistence of subversion and containment to certain degree as long as the subversion does not endanger their actual interests and change the relationship between the ruling class and those who are ruled. Containment suppresses subversion to a proper extent in order to prevent it from resulting in destructive effects. Only in this way can the subversion with real destructive force be contained safely.

Shakespeare's history plays are filled with the illustration of subversion and containment. The playwright constantly reminds the audience that there is no single power that dominates, and that everyone is only part of the network of power. Where there is the illustration of subversion, there is an example of containment.

One of the themes reflected in Shakespeare's second tetralogy is the subversion and containment of the divine royal power.

In *Richard II*, King Richard is convinced that the king is sacred and inviolable. He constantly compares himself to the sun.

*But when from under this terrestrial ball
He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines
And darts his lightning through ev'ry guilty hole,
Then murders, treasons and detested sins —
The cloak of night being plucked from off their*

backs —

*Stand bare and naked, trembling at themselves?
(Richard II.3.2.37-42)*

But King Richard himself soon realized that the sacredness of the king was nothing but a phantom.

*For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing his a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be feared and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable. And humoured thus,
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle walls, and farewell king!
(Richard II.3.2.155-165)*

Henry Bullingbrook displaced Richard from the throne with the help of the Percy family and has ascended the throne as Henry IV. Henry sees his son seeming to become another Richard, living a dissolute life. Opposition to the king becomes open rebellion, led by child of the Percy family Henry Percy, known for his courage and impetuous nature as Hotspur. Henry IV sees himself not in his son but in Hotspur as a brave soldier and a man of decision and action. Henry IV's nightmare of history repeating itself is that Hotspur will rebel against his son, just as he rebelled against Richard. But this time it is the rebel who loses and the real heir who wins.

Hotspur stated Henry IV as "ingrate and cankered Bullingbrook", "subtle king", and "vile politician, Bullingbrook" (*Henry IV, Part I, Act 1, Scene 3*), completely subverting the divine image of Henry IV as the king. And all the rebellions described in the second tetralogy themselves reflect the subversion of the divine right of kings. The difference is that Henry Bullingbrook wins and Hotspur loses. The failure of Hotspur can be regarded as a kind of containment.

The subversion and containment of power is also reflected in *Henry VI*. Duchess of Gloucester, as a woman living in a patriarchal society, strives to participate in what is considered a man's work. Compared with her husband, she is more aspirant, callous and calculating. She takes an active part in politics to fulfill her ambition. When she appears for the first time in *Henry VI*, she incites her husband, Duke of Gloucester, who is also the uncle of the king and Protector of England, to usurp the throne. She hinted at her ambition by describing her dream.

*Methought I sat in seat of majesty
In the cathedral church of Westminster,
And in that chair where kings and queens were
crowded,
Where Henry and Dame Margaret kneeled to me
And on my head did set the diadem.
(Henry VI, Part II.1.2.36-40)*

The subsequent soliloquy shows the Duchess' challenge and subversion of the patriarchal society as a woman.

*Were I a man, a duke, and next of blood,
I would remove these tedious stumbling blocks*

*And smooth my way upon their headless necks.
And, being a woman, I will not be slack
To play my part in Fortune's pageant.
(Henry VI, Part II.1.2.63-67)*

Different from such female character in the play as fighting against a patriarchal society, Jack Cade, the leader of the rebellion, fights against a feudal society. He leads a group of low-level masses represented by weavers, butchers, carpenters, etc. to rebel against the English king and the nobles. The following monologue can be seen as a declaration against the feudal society.

*And you that love the commons, follow me:
Now show yourselves men, 'tis for liberty.
We will not leave one lord, one gentlemen:
Spare none but such as go in clouted shoon,
For they are thrifty honest men, and such
As would, but that they dare not, take our parts.
(Henry VI, Part II.4.2.145-150)*

The commons defeat the army which was sent to suppress them, forcing the king to flee London. Jack Cade challenges Henry's authority openly and his rebellion itself is a subversion of royal power and feudal society.

Dissatisfied with their positions and situations, what the subversive forces in *Henry VI* combat against is the prevailing ideologies. The subversion is limited to a certain extent, which once it exceeds, it is contained. In the play, the fights against the prevailing ideologies end in failure as long as subversion endangers the ruling class.

After rejected by her husband, the Duchess resorts to witchcraft. She hires a witch to summon a spirit to predict the fate of the king. She is arrested on the spot of summoning as a user of witchcraft and the leader of a conspiracy against the king and sentenced to exile and life imprisonment.

In spite of the huge victory of Jack Cade's rebellion in the early stage, his followers are persuaded by Duke of Buckingham and Lord Clifford to forsake him. In the end, Jack Cade is killed by a Kent squire, Alexander Iden. The subversion of royalty and feudalism turns to fail.

Shakespeare portrays the subversion and containment of power at different levels in his history plays. He does not indicate his position in his works, but let the readers and audience judge for themselves.

V. CONCLUSION

Greenblatt believes that New Historicism is a kind of critical practice, which is different from the historical criticism that dominated in the past and different from the formalist criticism that emerged after World War II. The concepts of "textuality of history" and "historicity of text" proposed by new-historicist provide an effective way to examine the intrinsic connection between literature and history. This set of concepts opposes the simple division of literature and history, but advocates a complex dialogue between the two. Literature actively participates in specific

historical moments rather than passively reflects history. It is only possible to understand a particular literary text if one understands the historical facts that affect the author and the text.

This paper starts with the textuality of history, and uses Richard III as an example to sort out the complexity of the main historical material sources of Shakespeare's history play, and illustrates the influence of historians' own positions and perspectives on Shakespeare. Moreover, Shakespeare has also reconstructed the history in the text for his own purposes. Then through the analysis of the divine rights of the king, the succession of the throne and the illegitimacy of the Tudor Monarchies, the historicity of text in the Shakespeare history plays is revealed. In the following chapter, Greenblatt's model of subversion and containment of power is used to analyze Shakespeare's history plays.

Studying Shakespeare's history plays from the perspective of New Historicist mainly refers to examining the relationship between text and history, which means to put literary texts in the same position as non-literary texts and combine them together. By studying the mutual construction of literature and history, the new historicists, represented by Greenblatt and Montrose, have proposed new research methods for Renaissance literature and Shakespeare's history plays.

By analyzing Shakespeare's history plays from a New Historicist perspective, it can be concluded that the playwright himself is inevitably influenced by the era, social and political environment in which he lives when constructing literary texts. At the same time, the playwright also participates in the writing of history through the construction of literary texts.

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