



Introduction: Hermeneutics and Ideology

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“Thanks to a chapter on tobacco in my first book, *An Empire Nowhere*,” says Jeffrey Knapp, “I’ve often been asked whether I smoke. But no one who has read a portion of *Shakespeare’s Tribe* has ever asked me whether I go to church.” The reason for this lapse of scholarly or perhaps gossipy curiosity, he explains, is the embarrassing self-evidence that only a “devout Christian would want to claim that Shakespeare was religious.”¹ In the protocols of America’s public sphere, religion, like smoking, is a private vice, possibly even less healthy; one’s religion is certainly less mentionable than one’s smoking habits in polite company. Knapp goes on to explore, in his marvellous book, some of the reasons for the discomfort felt by the prospect of a religious Shakespeare.

In contemporary criticism, religion is apt to be seen as politics in another guise, and the task of a political criticism will be to deliver the medieval or early modern text from its own illusions, to complete the partial insights which it had not the language to say in its own time. Contemporary critics habitually exhibit what Quentin Skinner has called this “familiar but condescending form of interpretative charity.”² Indeed, we are far more likely to see critics pondering the failures of a medieval or early modern text to address our concerns than we are to find engagement with the complex ways in which these texts conceive their own, often thoroughly different, concerns. But, to quote Skinner again, “to demand from the history of thought a solution to our own immediate problems is thus to commit not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error. . . . [T]o learn from the past—and we cannot otherwise learn at all—the distinction between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements, is to learn the key to self-awareness itself.”³

One product of our own contingent arrangements is precisely what

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gets to count as religious and political in the first place. In the early modern period, as Peter Lake and Michael Questier have brilliantly shown, Catholicism “forced the state into making and maintaining a series of distinctions between religion and politics, conscience and treason.”⁴ The English Reformation transformed the relations between the temporal and spiritual spheres, and in doing so transformed their identities. Not only did the Reformation call into question the very boundaries of the temporal and spiritual spheres, seen, for example, in the struggle for legitimacy between the Elizabethan state and its Romish subjects, who remained committed to the church of their ancestors; the Roman Church also was conducted on rival, varying, and polemical distinctions between religion and politics, between, say, what was heresy and what was treason. Hence, to assume that we already know exactly where those lines lie and exactly what was at stake for those living through the “Reformation” is to commit the methodological fallacies, if not the moral errors, of which Skinner writes. It is, in any case, to fail in attentiveness to the situations of past texts and authors, to refuse to take their makers’ preoccupations and language seriously.

Ruminating on these kinds of issues, we imagined a special issue on “hermeneutics and ideology,” which would explore the hermeneutic presuppositions and consequences of current practices as they apply to explicitly religious writing in the medieval and early modern periods. We hope that this series of essays will examine some of the pieties of contemporary criticism, illuminate some important texts in medieval and early modern studies, and help us think about the polemical and rivalrous competing claims to the very arenas of religion and politics that might properly sponsor an attentive analysis of medieval and early modern texts, contexts, and their relations.



Notes

- 1 Jeffrey Knapp, preface to *Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theater in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), xi. At a conference on religion and literature at the University of Michigan in 2000, it was striking how many participants felt obliged to make counterconfessions against the contagion of their material: “I am not a Christian, but. . . .”
- 2 Quentin Skinner, “A Reply to My Critics,” in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988),

246. Toril Moi has recently trenchantly illuminated the “muddle” in what counts as political in contemporary theory and criticism in her excellent Cavellian essay, “Meaning What We Say: The ‘Politics of Theory’ and the Responsibility of Intellectuals,” forthcoming in *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Emily Grosholz. We thank Toril for allowing us to see a copy of this essay in advance of publication.

3 Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” in *Meaning and Context*, 67.

4 Peter Lake and Michael Questier, “Puritans, Papists, and the ‘Public Sphere’ in Early Modern England: The Edmund Campion Affair in Context,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 1.