

AA306: Shakespeare : text and performance
AA306/VCR7: Critical interventions

Producer: Jenny Bardwell

Contributor(s) in the clip:

Stephen Regan

Jerry Brotton

Terence Hawkes

Stephen Greenblatt

Clip transcript: AA306 Criticism and Theory

Stephen Regan:

One of the things I wanted to ask you Jerry, the difference between criticism and theory, is it a useful distinction to make?

Jerry Brotton:

I think in many ways it is I think it's important though to bear in mind the way in which theory does something very distinct from criticism. I think that the important distinguishing characteristic of theory, is that theory is something that you put to work around literature so I mean we can think for instance of the notion of arguments around feminism, being quite abstract theoretical issues, but now what's started to happen over the last couple of decades, is the way in which issues say around feminism can then be put to work. A theoretical issue can be put to work in relation to the play. So of course what that leads to is that you can take a theoretical argument around feminism, and say how does that help us think about say Lady Macbeth? How does it make us think about a character like Cleopatra? So theory in that way can be something that can be quite abstract, but then can also be something very enabling.

Terence Hawkes:

I can remember as an undergraduate and as a schoolboy writing essays on Macbeth as the embodiment of evil, as if evil was a free-floating quality like smog or smoke, floating in the air, and that occasionally attached itself to poor unsuspecting human beings. I don't believe that evil is like that I believe that evil is generated by a society for political or social purposes, and so a materialist reading of the play would say what is at stake in Macbeth in political terms?

Stephen Greenblatt:

When I was trained as a literary critic it was as a new critic, which was very good training I hope, but it meant absolutely treating the work of art as if it were a still object completely framed and isolated from the rest of the world the world it came from, the world it was going to except in so far as you could look at it as a purely formal object and analyse it in formal terms. It was a very good discipline and a very good way of actually paying attention to the literary object. But like all practices it began to feel airless after a while or routine, and new historicism in some sense wasn't very new at all but it was except in so far as an older historical practice an older interest in where these objects come from where they're going to, what entailments they have, what their situation is, had become outmoded or ignored, and then it was necessary to open the windows again and try to let some air in and think about doing this again so one piece of it was, as I say despite the phrase not so much new as just recovering.

Jerry Brotton:

All forms of criticism are underpinned by certain theoretical positions. People like A C Bradley, G Wilson-Knight, they're all informed by certain theories, we all are, that's how we live our lives, we live our lives by taking a bunch of assumptions, theories, ideas, ideals, and putting them to work in our everyday life. That's what we do when we read the plays.