

## Shakespeare's Censored Personality

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Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of  
Writing and Reading in Early Modern England  
by Annabel Patterson. 1992.

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Hailed a decade ago as a signal analysis of the sociopathology of censorship and an important contribution to early modern European cultural studies, the 1992 reprint of *Censorship and Interpretation* places Annabel Patterson among the most sophisticated theorists applying an inter-disciplinary model of social history to the interpretation of literary texts. Patterson's model of censorship departs from the concept that contested forms of discourse invariably involve unpublished, tacit modes of communication which leave no *transparent* imprint in the historical record, but which can be *inferred* by reading:

There is evidence [in Elizabethan texts], if we look carefully, of a highly sophisticated system of oblique communication, of unwritten rules whereby writers could communicate with readers or audiences (among whom were the very same authorities who were responsible for state censorship) without producing a direct confrontation. (53)

Patterson's model of the interaction between writers and censors depicts the ruling class as a complex entity, fraught with internal and politically consequential divisions. Censors, Patterson urges, are also readers, albeit readers with an unusually direct and conscious affiliation to the state's apparatus of domination.

Patterson's interest lies in weighing the sociocultural contradictions which give rise to the emergence of literature: her paradoxical central thesis is that "it is to censorship in part that we owe our very concept of 'literature' as a kind of discourse with rules of its own, a concept that has for centuries been thought to be capable of protecting writers who abide by those rules." (4) Citing Somans on the special dangers which highly placed writers posed for the stability of a regime, Patterson's new introduction imparts an intriguing perspective to her project of repoliticizing contemporary visions of the Elizabethan Renaissance: "It was the *highest placed author* who was capable of giving the greatest offense, but who was at the same time the least vulnerable" to reprisal from officials reluctant to transform rebels into martyrs. (italics added)

Vital to Patterson's thesis are the countervailing principles of *authorial intention* and *purposeful ambiguity*. In the hermeneutics of censorship, the latter becomes the governing principle by which a dangerous writer—of any

social class—transmutes social criticism into a literary modality which can evade the constricting nets of censoring officials. The technique is not new; Patterson quotes the advice of Quintillian, known to 16th century writers with university educations, as well as to modern students of Elizabethan literature:

You can speak as openly as you like against... tyrants, as long as you can be understood differently... if danger can be avoided by some cunning ambiguity of expression, everyone will admit its cunning. (Patterson, 15)

Surely it is no hyperbole to infer that the hermeneutic implications of Quintillian's principle have been overlooked by Professor Patterson's distinguished colleagues. Patterson, however, has at least glanced in the right direction. In her theory, the cunning intention to express offensive social criticism, cloaked in an ambiguous literary narrative or a "noted weed" (Sonnet 76), gives rise to the phenomenon we study under the category of literature. As Hamlet says, "the play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." (II.2.634) Indeed, Patterson's theory suggests that the idea of a literary figure, author or character who does not somehow intend to express an offensive social criticism—like comparing the king's conscience, as Hamlet does, to a small furry creature which squeaks and eats cheese—would be a monstrous oxymoron. Unlike some contemporary theorists, however, Patterson does not indulge in professorial contempt for the motives and literary intentions of writers. She seems to authentically admire Hamlet's courage at evading zealous censors.

Instead of rejoicing in the enigmas of obscure texts, then, Patterson offers "an account of fictional ambiguity, in which the indeterminacy inveterate to language was fully and knowingly exploited by authors and readers alike." (18) Her approach

Does not privilege either writer or reader, or eliminate either. It is hospitable to, and indeed dependent on, a belief in authorial intention, yet it is incapable of reduction to a positivistic belief in meanings that authors can fix. Indeed, what this study of the hermeneutics of censorship shows happening over and over again is that authors who build ambiguity into their works have no control over what happens to them later. (18)

I want to quibble with the phrase "no control" without discarding Patterson's basic premise that the evasion of political censorship through purposeful ambiguity—like Hamlet's pseudo anonymous mousetrap—involves a loss of control over the fate of the author's intended meaning. Patterson shows convincingly, for instance, that Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* became subject to retroactive allegorical interpretations which were almost certainly not intended by its author. Surely, though, for ambiguity to remain functional, a sophisti-

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cated literary mind like Shakespeare's must deposit some clues and set some guideposts for unborn readers.

Patterson's Elizabethan author, like Jacob, must wrestle with the Angel of Censorship; his modern counterpart, however, is as much detective as wrestler. Knitting together clues which have been rent asunder under the modern division of intellectual labor, such an author will want to consult a variety of sources to arrive at a more complete version of things as they were. Patterson's approach to literature as cultural politics, for example, assumes certain axioms about the historical configuration of literary discourses which might profitably be discussed in a more explicit theoretical spotlight. In her essay, "Lying in Politics," Hannah Arendt describes how:

Secrecy—what diplomatically is called "discretion," as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government—and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history... whoever reflects on these matters can only be surprised by how little attention has been paid, in our tradition of philosophical and political thought, to their significance. (1969, 4-5)

Elizabethans, of course, paid abundant attention to the Tacitean doctrine of politically justified "secrets of empire," and Patterson's hermeneutics of censorship implies that Elizabethan readers were probably correspondingly more conscious of the power of these secrets to generate literary forms of expression than are we moderns. Manipulation of public perception by a few power brokers in and around the Privy Council, writes Womersley in a recent monograph, was standard fare for an Elizabethan populace. As the 1590s—the decade of publication of the Shakespeare quartos—progressed without a clear solution to the looming succession crisis, national anxiety over the intersection between private secrets and public policy reached a fever pitch with the abortive Essex Rebellion in 1601. Such circumstances, writes Womersley, hinder our modern comprehension of Elizabethan realities. If

we now return to the question of the political interpretation of literature, we will appreciate that this restriction of significant political life to a small group of men immediately attendant on the monarch and operating in a closed environment further hinders our understanding of sixteenth century actuality, and thus our political interpretation of literature. As Cecil implied in likening the heart of Elizabethan politics to the dealings of lovers, the essence of that political life was quite private. (1991, 340)

The Shakespearean character, Troilus, cites Tacitean doctrine, as Cecil must have conceived it in the fin-de-siècle hothouse of Elizabethan London: "This is *a mystery in the soul of the state*—with whom relation durst never meddle." (III.iii.202) [italics added]. The hermeneutics of censorship draws attention

to an interpretative principle often obscured in critical discussions of the phenomenology of an Elizabethan drama such as *Troilus and Cressida*. By placing such a line in the mouth of a character, the author reveals his awareness of the problematic existence, in theory if not in actual practice, of *arcana imperii* and his contradictory relation to them. The insight invites a conjecture. Does the “mystery in the soul of the state” to which Troilus alludes have an identifiable Elizabethan content, or is merely a passing theatrical metaphor for a long-dead Trojan secret?

Patterson, for her part, seems to authorize the search for allegorical parallels, at least in the work of “real authors” exploring the boundaries of the acceptable in literary discourse. “It is because of my respect for the psychological component in interpretation,” writes Patterson in her introduction, “for the value of the devious traces real authors leave of themselves in their writing, that I have wished to tell a more intricate story about censorship than is still, I believe, the norm.” (30)

While scholars can applaud Professor Patterson’s desire to tell a more complex story about censorship than has been the norm, we need not agree with everything in this book. Patterson’s analysis of the political implications of *King Lear*, for instance, is particularly troubling, for she assumes long-standing chronological axioms of Shakespearean orthodoxy which fail to merit the credibility with which they have traditionally been invested.

A contrast here is instructive. Patterson offers keen insight into how the Jonsonian corpus developed in relation to the actual life of its real author, nicknamed “Honest Ben”—whose repeated confrontations with censoring authorities stimulated the development of a “social theory of literature, a poetics of censorship” (57) informing his poetry and drama as well as the theoretical criticism of his important but rarely read *Timber*. In contrast, Patterson’s theory falls flat when she attempts to explicate *Lear* and its purported author. Shakespeare remains in this book a cipher without a signification, a man without a politics, an *oeuvre* without a soul. Confined within the Stratfordian paradigm, Patterson’s theory stretches its wings but cannot fly. Her hermeneutic principles slip back into the same equivocating speculation which has always distinguished the arcane world of Shakespeare criticism from historical study of real Elizabethan authors.

If we *assume* a date of late 1605 to late 1606 for the composition of *King Lear*, we can *also assume* that it followed all of the other contributions to the Union controversy... (77) ...*if, then, we assume* that Shakespeare’s play was indeed a response to the Union controversy, but one deliberately shaped by its author’s understanding of the hermeneutics of censorship, we can recognize its first scene as a preliminary statement of the controlling discursive conventions, dramatizing restraints that the

play, by being a play, acknowledges and to which it makes formal submission. (79)

To her credit, Patterson acknowledges the arbitrary nature of the conventional dating of *Lear* to 1605. One suspects her candor to be motivated by misgivings over the paltry nature of the intellectual harvest gleaned from such a chronological assumption, however sanctioned by traditional authority, when one applies the hermeneutic principles elaborated in the book. The disappointment is proportional to the expectations aroused by the significance of Patterson's observation of that first scene's enactment of the hermeneutics of censorship. When Patterson discerns a confrontation between incestuous state authority and the ironically polyvocal "true author" speaking in the figure of the youngest daughter, she unlocks the scene's hidden power as a parable of censorship. In *Lear*, as in history, the politics of intrafamilial desire can determine the fate of nations, deform the history of epochs, and transfigure the authorship of texts practically beyond recognition. Cordelia, like the author of the sonnets, finds that art, "tongue-tied by authority" (66), must speak from the heart while employing all the rhetorical devices of a classically skilled orator. The play, of course, abounds with prolific reverberations of this opening motif of censored truth: the banishment of the "plain speaking" Kent, Edmund's conspiratorial forgery of the letter incriminating his brother of patricidal intrigue, and the ironic blinding of honest Gloucester for daring to "support a published traitor" (IV.vi.231) all spring to mind.

But Patterson's attempt to link this parable of censorship to the apparently "Learlike" behavior of James around the time of the 1605-06 Union controversy will fail to inspire confidence in critical readers. Relying on the censorship theme to support such a date of composition leads us so far from the resonant particulars of the text and the supposed context that it could be used as evidence for composition in any one of several previous decades—during which Elizabeth and other European monarchs were not unknown to have behaved in a "Learlike" manner.

In analyzing *Lear*, then, Patterson's hermeneutics don't come full circle, as they do when she discusses the complex mediations between Jonson's life and his art. In place of illumination, we get another "Stratfordian" litany of self-reinforcing assumptions. Patterson's method is circular, but it fails to yield the harvest of human reasoning which dignifies the "hermeneutic circle" as the method *sine qua non* of the human sciences. The profoundly revealing motif of author-as-censored-social-critic—a continuous presence in the Shakespeare corpus, from Jacques to Cordelia through Prospero and the author of the sonnets—while temporarily endowed with a veneer of plausibility, is finally sacrificed before the altar of orthodox Shakespeare chronology.

Patterson's pioneering analysis of the sociological dynamics of censorship,

however, does supply welcome analytical tools for refuting commonplace accusations that anti-Stratfordian premises are unhistorical or implausibly assume the presence of a malevolent conspiracy to defraud the literary public. In postulating the existence of a tacit system of “oblique communication,” Patterson leads the way in “reconstruct[ing] the cultural code” which informed the rhetorical strategies of Elizabethan writers and readers communicating via the nascent public sphere being brought into being by means of publication and the Protestant democratization of literacy. From Patterson’s account, it is clear that the rigorous evaluation and control of printed matter by Ecclesiastical censors—operating, in part, through the self-policing judicial organs of the Stationer’s Company in a pre-market context—left a distinct imprint in the literature of the period, one which can profitably be examined and analyzed through the illuminating theoretical spectacles of her “hermeneutics of censorship.” Elizabethans, confirms Patterson, “were far more sophisticated about the problems of interpretation than we might suppose... their sensitivity to both the difficulties and the interest of interpretation is remarkably well documented.” (52) This tacit system of oblique communication—encoding the *open secrets* which no loyal subject would commit for publication without the modesty of rhetorical ornament, lest naked truth betray both state and subject—is what contemporary orthodox scholars, unnerved by the glare of public exchange about the Shakespearean authorship, are accustomed to deride as conspiracy.

Perhaps it is a fitting irony, worthy of the complex and internecine history of the authorship controversy, that Patterson, who otherwise has voiced an imperious disdain for Oxfordian scholars, should become the author of a work which goes so far toward dismantling the epistemological presumptions on which orthodoxy has constructed its house of cards. In the present context of the failing orthodox paradigm of Shakespearean authorship, Patterson’s principles of interpretation, though still not appreciated for their implications, are of the greatest significance. Shakespearean orthodoxy has survived this century, in part, by cultivating the illusion that its experts can dispense with the hermeneutic enigmas of the Shakespeare canon by indefinitely rescuitating the 19th century romantic concept of a disembodied, transcendental and universal author, possessed by the *daimon* of an incomprehensible genius. Patterson’s method, instead, returns readers to a close inspection of a textual corpus which exhibits continuous signs of the author’s premeditation of her hermeneutics of censorship.

Patterson’s revived focus on the complexly mediated consciousness of Elizabethan writers will come as a welcome surprise, then, to students aware of how imperfectly and incompletely orthodox academicians have come to grips with the hermeneutic and epistemological perils of Renaissance texts. As

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Patterson stresses, despite a renewal of interest in the politics of Elizabethan drama among contemporary critics, “there is as yet no systematic account of the strategies of indirection” employed in public modes of discourse—in sermons, speeches or poetry as well as theater. (53) Although Patterson sets forth a blueprint for the development of such a comprehensive account, by admission of the 1992 introduction, her present book surveys only a fraction of the relevant territory. Patterson’s work opens new vistas in Shakespeare studies that are destined to be explored by the many students of her ideas, who will, as “time unfolds what pleated cunning hides,” more and more count themselves, overtly or covertly, as apostates to a withering Shakespearean orthodoxy.

### Notes

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### A Groatsworth Variorum

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Greene's Groatsworth of Wit.  
edited by D. Allen Carroll. 1994.

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*Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* became suddenly, almost explosively, interesting in 1778, when the following note, communicated by the scholar Thomas Tyrwhitt (1730-86), was published in George Stevens’s revised edition of Johnson’s Shakespeare:

Though the objections, which have been raised to the genuineness of the *three plays of Henry the sixth*, have been fully considered and