

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ  
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

# ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ



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# HUMAN REMAINS IN *HAMLET*, *KING LEAR* AND *OTHELLO*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The dominance of various forms of historicism in literary studies means that the study of literature has largely become the study of history. The essay counters this tendency by attempting to retrieve a sense of the human/humanist value of literature. However, rather than advocating a simple return to the kind of humanist criticism that was influential in the nineteenth and twentieth-century Anglo-American critical tradition, it engages via Shakespeare with sceptical perspectives in order to show how Shakespeare himself 'de-natures' the human but not to the point where it is emptied entirely of meaning.*

**Key words:** *human, humanism, anti-humanism, historicism, modernity, scepticism, disenchantment, Shakespeare, Renaissance*

According to Carla Mazzio and Douglas Trevor in their introduction to *Historicism, Psychoanalysis and Early Modern Culture*, “historicism” has become the default mode of critical practice’ (Mazzio and Trevor, 2000, 1). If historicism has established itself as the critical orthodoxy, then it is a diverse as well as contested orthodoxy: cultural materialism, new historicism, materialist feminism, the new economic materialism, and presentism do not name the same kind of historical endeavour. They are nevertheless united in their distrust of universals, their suspicion of ‘the human’, and their scepticism about literature’s timelessness. For older generations of critics, what made literature worth studying was that it was able to put us in touch with important existential questions. Books mattered because they were able to deepen our understanding of what it is to be human. A simple return to this kind of humanist critical discourse is probably neither possible nor desirable. Any revived humanism needs to engage with

those historicist, anti-humanist and post-humanist positions that challenge humanism out of the complacency to which it has sometimes been prone. This essay contributes to the reconstruction of a humanism that simultaneously questions itself and those extreme anti-essentialist perspectives which have tended to write ‘the human’ totally out of existence.

A few representative quotations will help to identify the terms of the debate I want to explore, the first from David Scott Kastan’s *Shakespeare after Theory*:

though [Shakespeare] does live on in subsequent cultures in ways none of his contemporaries do, it is not, I think, because he is in any significant sense timeless ... Rather, it seems to me it is because he is so intensely of his own time and place. (Kastan, 1999, 16)

This is the view that has become orthodox. This is the view that has made the use of the word ‘human’ almost taboo. It is a view that tells us to distrust sweeping generalisations about human existence and the human condition and instead to look at texts as products of their time and place.

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on a lecture given at the University of Banja Luka in March, 2008.

Against this, we can set two counter-perspectives from more recent work: Gary Day's 'Beyond Management Culture: The Experience of English', which declares its allegiance to (and quotes) F. R. Leavis; and Thomas Docherty's 'Aesthetic Education and the Demise of Experience':

I'm a Leavisite in the sense that I believe great art does implicitly ask the question 'What for – what ultimately, for?', and that it gives us not 'an answer', but 'the communication of a felt significance; something that confirms our sense of life as more than a linear succession of days, a matter of time as measured by the clock – "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow." (Day, 2005, 220)

... Things may 'happen', but they no longer acquire the *authority* of experience ... This is akin to the situation in which we suspect that 'modern man' may spend the day reading books, hearing music, seeing pictures; but that it is all so vacuous, productive either of ignorance or of trite rehearsals of orthodox 'criticisms'. This is one direct consequence of the age of 'information': the information/aesthetic overload allows no time to engage properly with any of it ... It is through the experience – intense moments of being or of becoming – offered by our engagement with art that we can imagine things undreamt of in our philosophies – or, to put it more simply, that we can *learn*'. (Docherty, 2003, 27-8)

Both perspectives take literature to be a counter-discourse that can remedy one or another perceived 'defect' of modernity: homogeneous, empty time (clock time) in the case of the first; information overload, in the case of the second. Where there is a danger that these might hollow out human experience, literature, so the claim goes, can 'deepen' our perception of what it is to be human.

The focus of this essay is on Shakespeare, for two reasons: first, because he has conventionally been taken to epitomise the literary, and can therefore be used to elaborate the nature of literature's engagement with the human; second, because his plays also persistently stage anti-foundationalist perspectives. Through

sceptics like Hamlet and cynics like Iago, Shakespeare's plays make us wonder what remains of 'the human' once it has been either thoroughly questioned (as in the case of Hamlet) or thoroughly manipulated (as in the case of Iago). Neither Hamlet nor Iago lives in his body or by 'instinct' (although Hamlet sometimes wishes he could). Both characters tend therefore to turn human nature into an 'object' from which they are removed. This makes both characters recognisably 'modern'. One aspect of modernity is the replacement of a sacred, enchanted view of reality with a secular, disenchanted view. Iago and Hamlet are both disenchanted sceptics. They do not automatically inhabit a world view or belief system. They keep their distance from ideas, feelings and beliefs to which other characters subscribe. For Hamlet, human nature therefore becomes an object of *enquiry*. For Iago, it is an object for *manipulation*. But the questioning of a Hamlet and the cynicism of an Iago are not, in my view, Shakespeare's final word, but stages on the way to a view of humanity that just – and only just – survives the scepticism (for further discussion of Shakespeare's scepticism, see Mousley 2007).

Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello* is the place where all certainties, all faiths, all ideals and all optimistic beliefs in human nature are destroyed. Iago, it seems, is completely oblivious to all the usual claims that are made on us as human or 'humane' beings. Loyalty, friendship, trust, attachment, love – these things mean nothing to Iago. His detachment from all things recognisably humane results in an unfeeling coldness. The way Iago describes his body – as a garden that can be replanted at will – shows a hard-headed, calculating rationality:

'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, sup-

ply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry, why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the beam of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this, that you call love to be a sect or scion. (Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2005, 1.3.319-32)

The idea of being able to choose our own natures was often viewed positively in the Renaissance. An example is Pico della Mirandola's famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (c. 1486). This is a text that has frequently been used to represent key features of Renaissance humanism. In it, God speaks to Adam, his first creation, about what kind of formless, nature-less thing human beings are:

We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire ... Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer (Mirandola, 1965, 4-5).

Iago represents the downside of this positive image of human beings being free to determine their own natures. The body brought under the control of an unfeeling, calculating rationality is simply an effective, sterile container for the accumulation of attitudes in which Iago does not believe. Iago is one of Shakespeare's many role players. He is able to assume different shapes, but none of them leaves any permanent trace on a body and mind that has been purged of passionate entanglements. A key statement occurs in Act 1. When he announces in Act I that 'for necessity of present life,/I must show out a flag and sign of love/Which is indeed but sign' (Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2005, 1.1.155-7), he is announcing the existence of a self from

whom the usual signs of humanity – in this case the capacity for love and friendship – have become totally alienated, disengaged. It is for others to be moved, manipulated or seduced by language and the ideas of the human embodied in it. 'Human nature' is not something in which Iago therefore participates. He is not part of or restricted by 'nature', but holds it at a distance, as an object that he works on and manipulates. If there is anything that is 'in' Iago, then it is rational self-interest. That is all that remains of the human. We are not meant to recognise this as a reassuring remainder of what survives when everything else has been demolished but as a drastic reduction of what it is to be human.

Of course, it is paradoxically 'in' human beings to reduce themselves in this way. I realise that I have been sliding the words 'human' and 'humane' into one another, as if they are inseparable. But they can and often have been separated. Human beings can paradoxically be inhuman, can behave inhumanely, as Iago does. Nevertheless, these words 'inhuman' and 'inhumanely' signal a deviation from a norm which Shakespeare tries to keep intact by marking Iago as a villain.

Whereas for Iago, human nature is an object for *manipulation*, for Hamlet, it is an object of *enquiry*. Hamlet notoriously delays taking any action, because the problem with Hamlet is that he is a thinker rather than a doer. He reflects on life and does not find it easy to translate thought into action. Thinking can put us at a distance from experiences in a good and a bad way: 'good' because we can turn the experience over, reflect on it in it, question it, see it from different perspectives; 'bad' because too much thinking can stop us from properly experiencing anything; it can make outsiders of us. Hamlet is the archetypal outsider, who thinks all certainties about human life and human nature out of existence. Thinking becomes a problem for

Hamlet because thinking – and thought’s realisation in language – can do anything. A quotation from the play that we might choose for Hamlet as a motto is: ‘There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so’ (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2005, 2.2.252-3). Thinking can turn an uncle into a father, or so Claudius hopes when he invites the grieving Hamlet early on in the play to ‘think of us/As of a father’ (1.2.107-8). It can make revenge seem like an act of heroism or an act of barbarism. It can make persistent mourning for a dead parent an act of loving remembrance or an unnatural perversion: ‘a fault to heaven / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature’ (1.2.101-2), according to Claudius. It can make human beings seem ‘the paragon of animals’ or ‘the quintessence of dust’ (2.2. 309-10). It can transform a cloud into a ‘camel’, then ‘weasel’, then ‘whale’ (3.2.365-70).

Hamlet is the fictional equivalent of Shakespeare himself in his inheritance of a variety of religious and cultural traditions into which he is never fully absorbed. Each of these traditions advances an idea of what human nature is or should be. So, for example, in the tradition of classical revenge tragedy, represented by the ghost, retributive vengeance – an eye for an eye – is a primal instinct. It is natural. The ghost itself appeals to ‘nature’ in its first encounter with Hamlet. Referring to his untimely death and the state of unconfessed sin in which he existed, the ghost of old Hamlet puts human instinct at the centre of the revenge plot: ‘If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not. Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damnèd incest (1.5.81-3). ‘Nature’ is a highly charged, volatile word in Shakespeare, but here the ghost tries to secure its meaning.

But the classical revenge tradition, with its emphasis on primal passion, is only one of several traditions which Hamlet inherits. Christian tradition gives Hamlet a number of further ideas of what it is to

be human, some of which, most notably the New Testament injunction ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord’ (King James Bible, Romans 12.19) are in direct opposition to the idea of human nature supplied by the classical revenge tradition. Vengeance, from a Christian perspective, is a violent appropriation of divine justice, which deforms the self. Christ was a man of peace and Hamlet at times echoes this pacifism in his shocked reactions to killing. The ghost implies that the vengeance pursued by a son on behalf of a father is a fulfilment of the self and what is natural to the self, whereas the Christian tradition implies that vengeance and its accompanying hatred imperil the soul.

There are, then, different accounts of nature and human nature in the play, to which Hamlet is subject. Hamlet is also the target of characters who destroy the supposedly natural and essential. Claudius, for example, seems to pay only lip-service to traditions and rituals and to the ideas of the human that they embody. His first speech makes a clear appeal to ‘nature’. Nature refers to the ostensibly natural human feeling of brotherly love, and, because Claudius uses the royal ‘we’, the natural love which subjects feel – should feel – for their sovereigns:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s  
death  
The memory be green, and that it us befitted  
To bear our hearts in grief and our whole  
kingdom  
To be contracted in one brow of woe,  
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature  
That we with wisest sorrow think on him  
Together with remembrance of ourselves.  
(1.2.1-7)

Of course, brothers might not feel unmitigated love for each other and the ties between subjects and sovereigns might not be as strong as Claudius would like. In fact, it seems that Claudius has himself proved as much by murdering his brother who was also his king. He has broken those



'natural' ties which he solemnly represents here as unbreakable. He also suggests that natural ties are transferable: 'think of us/ As of a father' (1.2.107-8), he tells the grieving Hamlet.

Hamlet is thus on the end of two opposing uses of the word 'nature'. One of his fathers or father figures in the play – old father Hamlet – uses the word 'nature' and means it and means the same thing by it throughout the play. The other father figure – Claudius – suggests that he might replace the 'natural', biological father, plays faster and looser with the word 'nature' and uses it conveniently, instrumentally, to suit his own purposes.

So where does this leave Hamlet? It leaves him sceptical of claims about human nature but also sceptical towards scepticism itself, in other words, sceptical towards those who don't seem to recognise any notion of nature.

Perhaps we also need to be sceptical about such scepticism? As already indicated, in the aftermath of the 1980s, the word 'human' became an almost taboo word in cultural criticism and theory. It signalled an outdated and naïve belief in supposedly universal truths that on closer inspection seemed not to be universal at all, but the products of particular, historically specific value-systems. In the longstanding 'nature' versus 'nurture' debate, appeals to the idea that we are who we are as a result of something called 'human nature' lost ground to the notion that we are the creations of our time, place and social circumstance. Ideas and theories emphasising the social construction of reality and identity were therefore 'in' and universals were 'out'. Politically inclined critics – critics who were bothered about social injustice of various kinds – were also antagonistic towards the idea of 'a' human nature that ignored differences of class, gender and race.

But as I've been suggesting, it is difficult to see how anyone concerned about

social injustice can do without some notion of what a human being is. Appeals to the human and to a common humanity therefore need not be at the expense of a concern with politics, society and history. In fact I would say the opposite, that they deepen our involvement in them. Paul Hamilton has argued that for the eighteenth century philosophers Giambattista Vico and J.G. Herder,

history, had to be understood as something we are actively engaged in, like purposeful living, not external to, like the phenomena rationalized by scientific investigation. (Hamilton, 1996, 41)

De-personalised history, history reduced, for example, to impersonal 'facts' will be in danger of becoming an alienated object, emptied entirely of any recognisable human concerns, whereas history 'understood as something we are actively engaged in' will necessarily depend upon some albeit slender sense of commonality. As for politics, appeals to a common humanity can be a democratic, levelling principle. Surely this is one of the lessons of Shakespeare's *King Lear*? The journey that Lear undertakes in the play is one that takes him out of the protective bubble of kingship and authority onto the wild and comfortless heath where he encounters other outcasts from society. In the early part of the play, there seem to be no limits to what he can say and do. If he wants to divide the kingdom, then so be it, he is the king, he can do as he pleases. If he wants to set his daughters a love test and demand that they tell him how much they love him, then again, so be it, he is the king and his power seems limitless. But what Lear learns is that beyond the trappings of power he is a 'mere' human being, whose vulnerabilities and needs turn out to be not so very different from the other human beings he meets on the heath. Lear's recognition of a common humanity clearly has political implications, as it brings him

down to earth and enables him to experience at first hand what it is like when certain basic human needs are not met.

I am not only thinking here about physical needs, but emotional ones as well. Lear needs a physical shelter but he also needs an emotional shelter. He is like a child who needs protection. What is common to the many different kinds of psychoanalytic theory which have developed since Freud is the fact of infantile dependency. This is the foundation upon which many different psychoanalytic theories are raised. We learn to become independent or partly independent but our dependence on others never entirely disappears. If it does, then we have reason to worry. To become *totally* disconnected, to 'stand', as Coriolanus puts it in another of Shakespeare's plays, 'as if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin' (Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, 2005, 5.3.35-7) is to deny our ordinary human need for others, a need which when excessive can of course make us vulnerable to them. We spend our lives trying to find a balance between relating and separating, connecting and disconnecting, merging and dividing. Perhaps the ideal relationship we might have with another human being is one in which we are both parent and parented, carer and cared for. Lear is an old man turned child for most of the play. He demands love and attention, and when he doesn't get them – from Cordelia – he sulks. Subsequently, the child is then abandoned by the daughters who falsely professed their love for him. And so the outcast Lear finds a surrogate family on the heath with the fool and Edgar disguised as a madman. Lear is parented once again but also becomes a parent, a carer for those who are also suffering neglect. Perhaps in this odd, idiosyncratic family, we see the basis of what a society responsive to elemental human needs might be like.

Having lived in a state, to cite Terry Eagleton, of 'sensory deprivation' (Eagle-

ton, 2003, 184), Lear on the wild and stormy heath experiences the opposite: sensory overload. As much as he attempts to deny the physical impact of the 'thought-executing fires' and 'oak-cleaving thunderbolts' (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2005, 3.2.4-5) by focusing on the mental storm caused by 'filial ingratitude' (3.4.14), the storm is irresistible. It is too much to bear, or as Kent puts it, in one of this play's many uses of the word 'nature': 'Man's nature cannot carry / Th'affliction nor the fear' (3.2.48-9). This anthropocentrism is emphatically not celebratory of human capacities and achievements, but rather an acknowledgment of the limits of the human. Again, these limits are not only defined by the frailty of the flesh to which Lear increasingly admits: 'Here I stand your slave, / A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man' (3.2.19-20), 'They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof' (4.5.104-5). They are also defined in affective terms, in terms, that is, of fundamental fears, anxieties and insecurities: the fear of abandonment; the chronic sense of insecurity arising from a world that has become utterly inhospitable; the fear that the human, natural and supernatural worlds have become entirely unpredictable; the fear that the human condition is a condition of metaphysical homelessness or, as Lear suggests, absurdity – 'When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools' (4.5.178-9).

The physical and emotional onslaught is unbearable for those characters who experience or witness it. But these 'raw' experiences save the human from the 'nothing' that it sometimes seems in danger of becoming as a result of the play's 'posthumanist' scepticism. They tell us what our limits are and when these limits have been traversed. The remedy, such as it is, for the breach of human equilibrium is 'repose', the 'foster-nurse of *nature* [my italics]' (4.3.12). Perhaps we can readily assent to

this piece of folk-wisdom? After all the uncertainty surrounding the terms 'nature' and 'natural', perhaps we cling to a use of the word that seems uncontentious. Yes, Lear with his 'bereaved sense' (4.3.9) needs rest and so, perhaps, do we, for our senses have also been assaulted. But through this assault, we rediscover what we are always, the play implies, in danger of forgetting, that we are 'all too human'.

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## OSTACI HUMANOSTI U HAMLETU, MAGBETU I KRALJU LIRU

### Rezime

Dominacija različitih formi istoricizma u proučavanju književnosti označava činjenicu da je proučavanje književnosti umnogome postalo proučavanje istorije. Ovaj rad se suprotstavlja takvoj tendenciji pokušavajući da vrati osjećaj humanih/ humanističkih vrijednosti književnosti. Međutim, umjesto da bude pobornik povratka onoj vrsti humanističke kritike koja je bila uticajna u devetnaestom i dvadesetom vijeku anglo-američke kritičke tradicije, ona preko Šekspira pokreće skeptične perspektive da bi pokazala kako sam Šekspir 'odrođuje' humano, ali ne do te tačke koja ga čini u potpunosti besmislenim.

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