

CHRONICON

AN ELECTRONIC HISTORY JOURNAL

Chronicon 3 (1999 - 2007) 7 – 35

ISSN 1393-5259

www.ucc.ie/chronicon/3/salkeld.pdf



MAKING SENSE OF DIFFERENCES: POSTMODERN HISTORY,
PHILOSOPHY AND SHAKESPEARE'S PROSTITUTES

Duncan Salkeld

University College Chichester

d.salkeld@chihe.ac.uk

ABSTRACT. The more radical postmodernist approaches to history have tended to turn what is ostensibly a subversive critique of common sense liberal assumptions into a kind of post-metaphysical de futilitate, preaching all is vanity. Yet an argument for the ineffectivity of all validity claims is patently self-defeating since scepticism regarding all distinctions of worth denies the very point of being sceptical. This predicament lies at the heart of the debate between Jean-François Lyotard and Jürgen Habermas over 'communicative reason', a debate upon which the possibility of historiography appears to rest. This paper argues that the philosophers Donald Davidson and Charles Taylor help us to see why postmodernist theory can offer no intelligible account of history. It concludes with a discussion of the representation of prostitution in Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure* to illustrate how historical evidence can improve an interpretation both of the past and the literary text.

KEYWORDS. postmodernism, history, pragmatism, intelligibility, truth theorems, translatability, incommensurability, evaluation, cultural recognition, relativism, sex, prostitution, Shakespeare.

'... There's glory for you!' 'I don't know what you mean by "glory"', Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"'. 'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected. 'When I use a word', said Humpty Dumpty in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less'.

(Lewis Carroll, *Through The Looking-Glass*)

Attitudes like Humpty Dumpty's seem to be becoming increasingly widespread in popular versions of postmodernism. It would now appear to be a kind of consensual 'truth' among post-modernists that words may indeed mean just what we make them to mean, except, of course, that no self-respecting Humpty Dumpty would tolerate anything so *démodé* as a 'consensual truth'. What justifies this view of meaning, apparently, is a wholesale acceptance of the superior explanatory power of postmodern theory, regardless of its particular forms, nuances or contradictions. Lump them all together and you have a bewildering tour de force of—well something (not reasoned argument since postmodern theory is sacredly revered as a critique of rationality)—but of texts ready to do battle with any other texts and conquer them once and for all in the high name of Infinite Undecidability. The facility of this kind of thinking becomes apparent as soon as it voices its 'always already' claim that meaning perpetually self-deconstructs in the process of interpretation. That said, there is, it would appear, no more to be said: the meanings of a text are radically plural and unstable since there can be no finality in meaning, no certain limits, no single or total interpretation of its signs. In the end, not that there is any end, all meaning is metaphor, inherently plural and undecidable, and there's an end of it (almost). There's an end to all singularities of meaning, rationality, interpretation, history, even ethics, so why not just forget all these grand, old-fashioned preoccupations with argument and lie back and 'swing'?

This line of thinking has some affinity with Richard Rorty's sophisticated but relaxed neo-pragmatist philosophy which seeks to ditch questions of logic and epistemology in favour of rhetoric, or, more precisely, the usefulness of particular vocabularies. Such vocabularies need not, Rorty insists, be regarded as 'rational' or 'irrational' but

rather as simply older or newer. 'Once we realize', he argues, 'that progress, for the community as for the individual, is a matter of using new words as well as of arguing premises phrased in old words, we realize that a critical vocabulary which revolves around notions like "rational", "criteria", "argument" and "foundation" and "absolute" is badly suited to describe the relation between the old and the new'.¹ Thus questions like 'How do you know?' can be replaced by rather different questions like 'Why do you talk that way?' with no neutral way of adjudicating between them in any kind of standoff. Rorty again: 'Because of this indefinite plurality of stand-points, this vast number of ways of coming at the issue sideways and trying to outflank one's opponent, there are never, in practice, any standoffs'.² It is not far, then, from this position to the kind of postmodern claim one encounters fairly frequently these days (I shall give an example from Lyotard later in this article) which maintains that—semantic neutrality being unavailable—the old ways of talking in terms of reasons, criteria, or forms of argument will simply no longer do. In this paper, I want to suggest that the leap from finding difficulties with the 'old talk' to rejecting it entirely in favour of a wholesale postmodern relativism is unwarranted and unreasonable. In seeking so assiduously to avoid dogmatic rationalism, this view assumes, peculiarly, that if a set of concepts or distinctions is not finally, utterly, totally successful (neutral) , it might just as well be totally useless. It assumes, for example, that since there are good reasons for regarding words like 'good', 'reason', 'fact', 'consciousness', 'event', or 'truth', as problematic, they should be struck from the register of critical language altogether, and replaced with a more exciting terminology of 'plurality', 'metaphor', 'textuality', 'undecidability', 'trace', 'differance'. The argument of this paper is intended to be not that this replacement terminology is any better or worse than the one it has superseded, but that it could not be regarded as superior without criteria of intelligible critique. Postmodernists, I shall be arguing, like everyone else, have to play the criteria game. Thoroughgoing scepticism can all too easily slip

¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, solidarity* (Cambridge 1989) 48-49. I am grateful to members of the English Research Seminars and the Postmodern Reading Group Seminars at Chichester for their comments on a draft of this paper, especially Keith Jenkins and Peter Brickley, Bran Nicol, Alison Macleod, Hugh Dunkerley, Jan Ainsley, Jon Small, Karin Stott, Jane Smart, and Glenda Ford.

² *ibid.* 51.

into another form of absolutism and thus risk the self-refuting paradox that the denial of basic conditions ('foundationalism') might itself turn out as a kind of basic condition. So however much postmodern sceptics may cavil in dubiety, they still need 'good reasons' for the views they espouse if such 'paradoxes' or self-refutations are to be avoided. It is, of course, perfectly possible that the sceptics do not actually have good reasons for their views, but it is unlikely that they would not wish to have any reasons at all.

There is one fairly obvious reason why postmodern relativists and sceptics tend to phrase their claims—paradoxically—in terms of rational, consequential inferences. They have to. For even to deny logical consequence or entailment, one would have to have no reason for doing so. And that would be crazy. If we look at some examples of 'postmodern reasoning', we can see this dependence upon consequentiality or entailment clearly at work. Examples might be drawn from any discipline but I have noticed them recently attaching to problems of historiography. The emergence of 'postmodern history' offers an illuminating example of how appropriations of postmodernist theory may constitute a species of broader conceptual relativism. In debate about the meanings and status accorded to 'history', this relativism is urged along the lines that since there are no neutral, final, criteria for deciding what history is 'good' for, any version of history will be as 'good' as any other. History in its postmodernist version thus divides into a plurality of histories, each acutely conscious of its relativized status. It seems a bit odd, though, that this claim for history as a loose ensemble of multiple contingent discourses is often supported by a number of reasons, serially lined up by the postmodern historian by way of destroying the opposition. These reasons tend to take the form of inferences which begin with a premise (or antecedent) and follow through recursively to a conclusion (or consequent). They include the following:³

³ These inferences may all be found, for example, in Keith Jenkins's article 'Why bother with the past', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory & Practice* 1 (1997) 56-66, and correlate with the following quotations from that article: (1) 'postmodernists know that the past has neither rhyme nor reason in it. That it is unfathomable, sublime, shapeless, formless. Consequently, post-modernists recognize that to give something formless, to give to something shapeless a shape, to give the non-storied the form of a narrative structure as if such a narrative corresponded to the structures of real stories ... to do all these things is

- historical narratives serve as a kind of framing fiction, therefore the facticity of history is fundamentally undermined
- all history is written in the present, therefore the 'past' has no independent reality, (therefore there is no 'past')
- history has no essence or intrinsic priority-driven matter of its own (like facts or laws), therefore the historian has nothing she/he must attend to or respect
- textuality constructs historical knowledge, therefore to construct an historical text is to construct 'history' (therefore, history has no extra-textual reality)
- historians only write interpretations of the past, therefore there can be neither historical knowledge nor truth
- history is written in conventions of language, therefore histories are relative and convention-specific
- meaning does not correspond to real objects in the world, therefore history cannot claim to have anything to do with reality

to realize that historiography ... is ... an aestheticizing practice' (62); (2) 'Insofar as we have thought that there really is a history (a past) that has its own demands, then we have forgotten that we've merely been throwing our voice. As soon as you think about it, the idea of a historicized past existing independent of our variously present-day constitutive concerns is an absurd one' (61); (3) 'The historicized past itself thus contains nothing independent of us that we have to be loyal to ... no facts we have to respect' (64); (4) 'the past as such doesn't exist *historically* outside of historians' textual constitutive appropriations, consequently, being constructed by them it has no independence to resist them at an aesthetic "level of signification"' (64); (5) 'And whilst we suspect that there may well be a "real past" (an actual past) metaphorically underlying all our disparate versions of it, we "know" that that past, that "real referent", is ultimately inaccessible, and that all we have are our versions ... but that hardly matters, since versions are all we've ever had' (61); (6) 'language is anterior to the world it shapes; ... reality is a linguistic construct' (59); (7) 'historiography per se now appears to be just one more foundationless positioned expression in a world of foundationless positioned expressions as we collapse the "referent into representation"' (61); (8) 'because today there are so many explicit, competing notions of good with no neutral (foundational) criteria for adjudication between them, so not only does the ultimate closure of "the good" become endlessly deferred, but the idea of what constitutes a "good historical consciousness", or indeed a "good history", is similarly affected: we now have no clear sense of what a "good historical consciousness" is' (62); (9) 'Postmodernism therefore does, I think, signal the end of history as modernists have construed it' (65); (10) 'we can never get out of this subject-object/object-subject reversal into a higher resolution or synthesis whereby we can ever really sort out and thus know what we had made of the past/history and what the past/history (us) had made of us' (66, n. 2).

- there are no ultimate, neutral values by which to live, therefore history cannot be regarded as a repository of those values (therefore history can offer nothing by way of ethical guidance)
- modernist views of the past are discredited by theory, therefore theory spells the end of (modernist) history
- though language always constitutes the objects of history, historical artefacts may shape historical language, therefore no historical perspective is stable or sufficient.

As attempts at sequential entailment, these inferences do more than simply list a few opinions; they invite us to credit that their conclusions reasonably follow from their premises. As arguments about history, they seem radical and challenging but only if a very conservative, naïve view of history is kept in mind. Each proceeds with an absolutist version of history which it goes on to deny absolutely, assuming a pure concept of history in order to make its critique. Start out with a less naïve view of the 'objectivity' of history, and the absolute scepticism of the conclusions begins to look like an overreaction. So the finality of each conclusion is not entailed by the excitement generated in each premise. Only, it seems, an impossible ideal of a criterialess discourse could induce one to cling to such universals. But while an entirely standardless history may seem to some attractively 'nihilist' or 'utopian', it is neither practicable nor intelligible.

The absence of final criteria for interpretation is, then, no ground for an endlessly deferring scepticism about the adequacy of particular interpretative acts. Adequacy is only, and remains, a matter of agreement subject to evidence. The postmodernist denial that one can reasonably evaluate between historical interpretations lends equal validity to readings which claim to be true—the very point which postmodernists are at pains to reject. There are, of course, criteria for historical interpretation—the need to account for contestation and change; to collate objects from and information about the past; to sift different kinds of evidence; to differentiate nearer contributory factors from remote ones; to produce an intelligible as opposed to a nonsense account of events—and these criteria might be shared by most who aspire to write histories. At least, an historian ignorant of process,

heedless of chronology, clueless as to what might count as evidence, and wildly eccentric in interpretation is unlikely to be regarded as good at doing history, one would have thought, since criteria of relevance and intelligibility attach to acts of interpretation. There is, arguably, a minimum degree of competence required for any kind of intellectual study, including the discipline of history. One would not recognise a text as an account of history if its writing did not repose on some minimum standards of genre and intelligibility. But to claim this much is hardly to warrant a wholesale foundationalist view of what 'doing history' really entails. Those who see a neutral history as the only one worth striving for (and if it can't be had, the very possibility of history is denied), throw the whole thing in because they demand the impossible. Theirs is a kind of all-or-nothing position which asserts that since genuine difficulties attach to historical/textual interpretation, it must follow that all interpretation is in the end 'fatally flawed' or futile. But only a hopelessly naïve belief in the absolute conceptual purity of an intellectual discipline could be so flawed.⁴ Any view of historical interpretation which disavowed total conceptual purity would have not a single glove laid on it by this form of critique. Most people can accept that all sorts of difficulties and unknowns intervene with primary source material, empirical evidence, contextual bias and establishing agreement, since these are precisely what makes the study of history interesting and worthwhile. But no one needs to assume, as some postmodernists do, that since the history writer cannot step outside her language, community and time, her narrative of the past is 'fatally' disabled. There is, of course, no stepping 'outside' the language of our communities and so too, of course, there is no pure vocabulary of 'fact' that an imagined 'neutral' history could articulate. Once that illusion is dispensed with, and it is allowed that that there simply are no non-evaluative discourses, the need to generalize about the fallibility of interpretation drops away, and more complex considerations of what makes an interpretation more or less persuasive come into view. If postmodern sceptics were true to their own lights, they need not be anxious to generalize from the relativity of validity claims to the futility of making all such claims. They could allow that giving up all pretence to absolute truth in

⁴ See John R. Searle, 'Literary theory and its discontents', *New Literary History*, 1994, 25: 637-67, esp. 637-38.

interpretation is not to give up consideration of possible conditions which underpin relative validity claims—the condition, for example, that a case which questions all distinctions of worth could not coherently advocate the superiority of postmodernist theory over humanist common sense. The discourses of history, like all critical inquiry, cannot be other than an evaluative kind of writing, and for postmodernists to argue that we should ‘forget history’ because evaluations are non-foundational is just a confession of incoherence. Not even postmodernists can live in a criterialess world.

The reasons to which postmodernists appeal in making their critique of conventional history need to be worked through, argued and tested, rather than flatly asserted. For example, the thesis that ‘the past does not exist historically outside of historians’ textual constitutive appropriations’ (see nn. 3 and 4) is obviously misleading since texts which are not the products of the present may have meaning for historians by virtue of their difference from the present. The case that historians impose artificial or ‘poetic’ beginnings and endings on the continuous flux of experience rests upon a silent truth-criterion by which the postmodernist thinks to distinguish the reality of the past as ‘unfathomable, sublime, shapeless and formless’ (see n. 3, 1) from the ‘aestheticizing’ uses of metaphor in historical explanation. Postmodernism, of course, disowns any such criterion. Refusal to talk in terms of ‘causes’, ‘events’, ‘consequences’, or ‘facts’ because such concepts are not unproblematic renders the historian inarticulate about historical change, and pre-empts questions about partiality, gender, historicity or rhetoric which ask for cautious inquiry rather than rash dismissal. But perhaps the most basic confusion in postmodernist claims about history is the assertion that since there are so many competing versions of ‘events’, ‘the facts’, or ‘the good’, significant agreement between them is either impossible or pointless. I want to go on to suggest that there are good reasons for rejecting this assertion, but since these may principally be found among (non-postmodernist) philosophers, it means losing sight of history for a while in favour of philosophy—though history is a subject to which I shall return towards the end of this discussion.

One of the principal concerns of much modern critical theory has been to highlight differences between interpretations. Communicative ideals such as shared understanding or successful and distortion free communication have been suspected by writers like Foucault and Althusser as thinly disguised attempts at ideological coercion. Interpretations which set out to explore areas of agreement may indeed elide or marginalize important critical interests under a guise of neutrality. But an exaggerated emphasis upon difference in theory can tend to pass over key questions of what it is for a sentence to have meaning, what makes understanding possible, and what constitutes relative success or failure in intelligibility. The contrast between postmodernists who emphasise the radical otherness of communicative practice and those—including some Marxists and liberals—who see dialogue as a question of broad philosophical ‘good faith’ is thrown into sharp relief in the long-running debate between the ‘Frankfurt School’ critic of social theory, Jürgen Habermas and the celebrated French conceptual aerialist and post-modernist Jean-François Lyotard.⁵ Lyotard’s work sits alongside that of Foucault and Derrida in that it resists all those totalizing forms of thought associated with metanarratives, rationality, stable meanings, ends of argument, human emancipation or social progress. Lyotard invokes a realm of the ‘unpresentable’ as that which cannot be reduced to a concept, reason or knowledge, and which thus provides the basis for a theory of equivalence between multiple points of view or ‘differends’. Theory, for Lyotard, has a minimal part to play in localized debates between shorter philosophical narratives but can lay no serious claim to solving larger problems of historical truth, emancipation or enlightenment. This line of thinking has led to some ugly disagreements: Habermas has described Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault and Baudrillard as a bunch of “Young Conservatives”, Manfred Frank has termed Lyotard a ‘neo-Fascist’, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has called Habermas a ‘Dinosaur from the Aufklärung’.⁶ Habermas’s argument thus stands against what he sees as an irrationalist tendency in much postmodernist theory. Fully conversant with critics of Enlightenment rationality, like Weber, who hold that norms for human conduct are

⁵ Mark Poster, ‘Postmodernity and the politics of multiculturalism: the Lyotard-Habermas debate over social theory’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38 (1992) 567-80.

⁶ *ibid.* 568.

chosen or decided rather than grounded in reason (which, Weber maintained, had only produced a bureaucratic 'iron cage' mentality), Habermas has consistently argued that, in order to generalize about meaning, interpretation, understanding and action, or even their impossibility, one must have learnt how to be a participant in processes of rational evaluation. For Habermas, even the most basic understanding of an interpretation presupposes a minimal awareness of the validity claims implicit within it. What sustains this minimal awareness, Habermas controversially suggests, is the possibility of non-coerced, non-distorted, illusion-free communication, which Habermas has famously characterized as an 'ideal speech situation'. Despite criticism of this notion for its obvious 'idealism', Habermas has repeatedly defended it as a posit necessary to any account of how technical, practical and emancipatory human interests may combine to constitute knowledge. Such knowledge is in no sense absolute since it depends upon achieved understanding which itself turns upon a 'pragmatics of communication' which all participants assimilate with varying degrees of success. The goals of interpretation, or any other communicative action, in Habermas's view, are agreement, shared understanding and social accord, all of which are enabled by the rational clarification of distorted communication. These outcomes may not be currently fashionable but neither are they, as Habermas regards them, inevitable or politically quiescent: 'Communicative reason', Habermas writes, 'operates in history as an avenging force'.⁷

Lyotard, for his part, regards Habermas as hopelessly deluded if he thinks he can legislate between all language forms or games and build upon that generalization a workable theory of knowledge and emancipation. For Lyotard, social accord may be one stage in a continuing discussion but it is by no means an end in itself. Once we get rid of metanarratives, the legitimacy of shorter narratives resides only 'in the simple fact that they do what they do'. There is just no need, he thinks, to play the language game of legitimacy.⁸ Habermas's mistake, therefore, is to suppose, along with Kant and Hegel, that theory can think through to some essential ideal for reason, disengaged

⁷ Cited in Richard J. Bernstein's introduction to *Habermas and Modernity* (Oxford 1985) 25. I owe several of the points in the passage leading up to this quotation to Bernstein's introduction.

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester 1988) 23.

from the particular narratives which frame philosophical history. Kantian foundationalism is, for Lyotard, simply an arbitrary point at which to begin (and, in its later variants, end) a philosophical metanarrative, and Habermas might do better, he thinks, to take a less certainist point of origin for knowledge. Richard Rorty, for example, has argued that the sceptic Hume, or, even earlier, Francis Bacon, might prove a better starting point for seeing philosophy's proper role. So, Rorty argues, if we see Descartes's attempt to found a sovereign, stable consciousness as the certain basis of all knowledge, or Kant's project to secure the necessary categories of all pure, practical or aesthetic reason, as so many 'wrong turns' in philosophical history, Habermas's preoccupation with deriving a universal pragmatics of communicative reason from language (the 'ideal speech situation') and theorizing knowledge on the basis of technical, practical and emancipatory interests, begins to look rather like another belated foundationalism, another 'wrong turn'.⁹ Rorty elsewhere suggests that Habermas's theory of communicative reason is better read as an account of how social purposes may be served by harmonizing interests in any given community at any given time. So if Habermas could relax his claim on what Rorty sees as unnecessary universal Enlightenment categories of thought, he'd have marked out a flexible and potentially useful pragmatist position. His theory simply does not need its foundationalist claims.¹⁰

Habermas responds to Rorty by asking if he is arguing a case here, or simply offering an opinion, since, in Habermas's view, there is a distinction between the two activities. Where any plurality of views is concerned, there is no reason, Habermas argues, to suppose that they could be somehow radically incompatible. Different views, values, belief-systems, may cause friction but they will not be totally incommensurable. Belief-systems could only contradict one another, Habermas maintains, when 'those who are concerned with problems define them in a similar way, believe them to need resolution, and want to decide issues on the basis of good reasons'. Habermas holds that in treating argumentative validity as a matter of what is held true at a

⁹ Richard Rorty, 'Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity' in Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, 170.

¹⁰ Rorty, *Contingency*, 61-69.

given time, Rorty has to ignore the condition that in order to conduct an argument it is necessary first to have learnt the performative attitude of being a participant in argument. That is, one can only claim, state or argue that X is the case in a context where others claim, state or argue that Y or Z is the case. To deny this condition is to hold that convictions are really only a matter of opinion. But, Habermas argues, the mere offering of opinions does not account for the potential reserve of reasons that may be challenged in any communicative exchange. Non-recognition of this reserve of reasons implies that the opinions of a participant in a difference of view are all that could count in a dispute, a position which Habermas suggests is 'irrational'. Rorty's attitude of challenging foundationalist assumptions is qualitatively different, Habermas argues, from an attitude which merely expresses an opinion since it depends upon an organized 'reserve of reasons' which underlie the casual style of his advocacy of pragmatism.¹¹ Reading the implications of this debate, it seems that Rorty, for his part, could relax the distinction between opinion and conviction with his characterization of an 'ironist' as one who holds a 'final vocabulary' of worth but remains aware that it is by no means 'neutral' or 'ultimate', and may be qualified or replaced by new vocabularies.¹² It remains open to Habermas, however, to respond on two counts. First, that Rorty's 'ironist' could get into a difference of opinions, but must remain inarticulate about the reasons for holding those opinions. She or he would thus be incapable of disagreement so far as reasons were concerned. And second, who, in a moment of danger, would entrust their life to an ironist? Those who do not hold their views with conviction need not be taken seriously.

In what remains of this paper, I want to suggest that the philosophical work on interpretation and recognition by Donald Davidson¹³ and

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, 'Questions and counterquestions', in Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity*, 192-216; quotation from 194.

¹² Rorty, *Contingency*, 73. Rorty (61) characterizes Habermas as 'a liberal who is unwilling to be an ironist'.

¹³ Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into truth and interpretation* (Oxford 1984); see also Jonathan Harrison's 'The Trouble with Tarski', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 48 (1998) 190 for a lively critique of T-sentence logic. For a wider perspective on Davidson, see Reed Way Dasenbrock (ed), *Literary theory after Davidson* (University Park, PA 1993).

Charles Taylor¹⁴ provide a theorised account of how interpretative impasses may, in principle at least, be resolvable by means of reasoned evaluation, and go on to suggest how history thus conceived can help to get somewhere in the interpretative process. If Habermas's project of establishing a common pragmatics of communication is rejected for its idealism, Davidson's arguments about the 'translatability' of natural languages reformulate that question by focusing on the question of what it is that makes a language learnable. Davidson is neither an exciting nor an easy read but he has an important argument about how speakers belonging to different cultures may make sense of each other's utterances. In 1969, the philosopher W. V. Quine, Davidson's former teacher, published an essay on 'ontological relativity' in which he argued that speakers of different languages could, in theory, inhabit such incommensurable belief-systems, or 'conceptual schemes', that they would fail to correspond in all respects.¹⁵ The line of Davidson's argument, however, is that if languages are learnable, they must also be translatable; and if translatable, then they could not be incommensurable. Davidson offers the following hypothesis as a test of this case for translatability: if a theory could be formulated that summarized precisely how certain sentences—in any natural language—were true, one would have a way of showing how speakers in different languages could, in principle, understand each other, at least so far as the truth of those sentences was concerned. Davidson proposes just such a theory. Simplifying somewhat, Davidson may be taken as suggesting that since certain kinds of trivially true sentences, or truisms, in English will remain true in translation, this is precisely what an interpreter can count on or know. So, Davidson maintains, there are some sentences in English for which one can formulate a truth-theory which would hold for all similar or equivalent sentences (p.25). Such 'T-sentences', as the philosopher Alfred Tarski characterized them in 1933 (p. 66), are susceptible to a logical proof—Tarski's Convention T—which clarifies the relationship between the sentence's syntactical structure and its truth.

¹⁴ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: examining the politics of recognition*, introduction by Amy Gutmann with critical commentary by K. Anthony Appiah, Jürgen Habermas, Stephen C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer and Susan Wolf (Princeton 1994).

¹⁵ W. V. Quine, 'Ontological relativity', in Quine (ed) *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York 1969).

The T-sentence hypothesis rests on the question of how sentences actually make sense. They do so, Davidson maintains, by virtue of their recursive (linear) syntactical structure. Convention T sets out, in the form of an abstract theorem, the recursive truth conditions for certain sentences in a natural language (L). As Davidson explains it, Convention T holds that,

... a satisfactory theory of truth for language L must entail, for every sentence *s* of L, a theorem of the form '*s* is true if and only if *p*' where '*s*' is replaced by a description of *s* and '*p*' by *s* itself if L is English, and by a translation of *s* into English if L is not English (p. 194).

T-Sentences are those which most simply accord with this truth formulation. Davidson cites several examples of T-sentences, including Tarski's 'snow is white if and only if snow is white'. Such 'trivially true' sentences meet the Convention T theorem in every particular since their predicate satisfies (recursively) the demands of its syntax imposed by the biconditional 'if and only if' (iff). The important point about biconditional (iff) T-sentences is that they are both sufficiently and necessarily true in and of themselves without further need for verification by appeal to evidence, experience or sensory promptings. The work of the theorem, then, is not trivial since it entirely satisfies, and is entailed by, the infinity of possible T-sentences. If recursivity is a condition of intelligibility, then the intuition that we could reasonably expect T-sentences to be held true in any language is concisely theorized by Tarski's Convention T. In arguing this much, Davidson is not advocating a universal syntax—of proper nouns, pronouns, connectives, articles and quantifiers—for all natural languages—but he is assuming that other natural languages will make sense (have finitude) in their own terms by some means of linguistic recursion or satisfaction. So, for Davidson, grammar and intelligibility go together:

To see the structure of a sentence through the eyes of a theory of truth is to see it as built by devices a finite number of which suffice for every sentence; the structure of the sentence thus determines its relation to other sentences. And indeed there is no giving the truth conditions of all sentences without showing that some sentences are the logical

consequences of others; ... grammar and logic must go hand in hand (p. 61).

The T-theorem thus serves Davidson's purpose as a demonstration of the possibility, in principle, that a speaker of one language would be able to construct a theory of truth for the speaker of another. This would involve a process of finding out what sentences the alien holds true in his/her own language, constructing a characterization of truth-for-the-alien, and so developing 'an infinite correlation of sentences alike in truth'. T-sentences simply give the interpreter/translator the reassurance needed if he/she were to make a start. Davidson accepts that there would be some margin of error along the way—allowing for simplification, hunches about social conditioning and working through explicable error—but he maintains that 'charity in interpreting the words and thoughts of others is unavoidable... just as we maximise agreement, or risk not making sense of what the alien is talking about, so we must maximise the self-consistency we attribute to him, on pain of not understanding him' (p. 27).

This brings us to Davidson's main argument in response to the question of incommensurability raised by Quine. The possibility for communicative success rests, Davidson maintains, upon a strong and workable notion of 'translatability'. Whereas linguists and philosophers of science, like B. L. Whorf and Thomas Kuhn (and so too, postmodernists like Lyotard) have tended to see what passes for 'knowledge' or 'truth' as always relative to different conventions of language, 'paradigms' or 'conceptual schemes', Davidson argues that the idea of radical incompatibility between languages or world views strictly doesn't make sense. B. L. Whorf's case that the language and belief-system of the Hopi Indians is so radically different from our own that understanding between the two appears impossible is made, Davidson points out, precisely by outlining the differences between them. 'Kuhn is brilliant', Davidson writes, 'at saying what things were like before the [scientific] revolution using—what else?—our post-revolutionary idiom'. Similarly Lyotard goes to considerable lengths to theorize Kantian sublimity as 'the unrepresentable' in—not surprisingly—

the presentational symbolism of language.¹⁶ What these examples point up is that knowing a difference must mean knowing what it is about the other which makes it different. Differences must be interpretable: they must make sense. Simply, Davidson suggests, one must—in order to recognise what may count as a difference, or a significant convention—have already settled a great deal about what the other world-view participant believes and holds true. Total incompatibility between languages or belief-systems is inconceivable because one could not know when all the possibilities for understanding had been exhausted. Partial failures of translation are, of course, only to be expected but they will arise, Davidson argues, ‘against a background of common beliefs, and a going method of translation’ (p.196).

This approach to understanding as an outcome of successful translation does not eliminate disagreement, but actually makes it possible. People have to know what they disagree about. Taking Davidson’s point about translatability as the key feature of a learnable language, therefore, we can theorize Habermas’s ‘ideal speech situation’ as realizable in the transcultural mediations of language itself. The principle of charity which allows for approximation in translation rather than a perfect fit accounts for the pragmatic difficulties which might be encountered in any communicative exchange. As Davidson argues,

Charity is forced upon us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters ... We make maximum sense of the thoughts and words of others when we interpret in a way that optimizes agreement ... we improve the clarity and bite of declarations of difference, whether of scheme or opinion, by enlarging the basis of shared (translatable) language or of shared opinion (p. 196-97).

In a sense, then, Davidson qualifies rather than contradicts Quine’s theory of ‘ontological relativity’. Quine’s theory could not make sense, he argues, without adding in those necessary conditions of charity and translatability between languages alien to one another without which ‘we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or

¹⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 77-79.

beliefs radically different from our own' (p. 197). Davidson sets out the conditions that apply if a theory of relativism is to make sense.

Now Habermas takes a consensual approach to truth which plays an integral role if the possibility of emancipation or enlightened understanding is to be realisable. Hence he claims that, 'In order to distinguish true from false statements, I refer to the judgment of another—and indeed to the judgment of all others with whom I could enter a conversation ... The condition for the truth of statements is the potential consent of all others ... Truth means the promise to attain a rational consensus'.¹⁷ Davidson, I suggest, helps to explain how the logical conditions for any intelligibility at all tell us why Habermas must be on the right lines. From Davidson's perspective, the hypothetical 'ideal speech situation' seems much less hypothetical and 'ideal' when formulated alongside the formal possibility of successful translation between natural languages.

If, as I think Davidson shows, participants in an interpretative disagreement must assume minimal criteria that each other's languages make sense and aim for self-consistency, then this is all that is needed for each to begin an evaluation of the other's position. Indeed, if Davidson is right in claiming that logic and grammar 'go hand in hand', then to be a speaker of a language is to be an agent of reasoned evaluation. Where interpretative dilemmas arise, they do so because there are good reasons for seeing things differently. Dilemmas don't arise without reasons. Now, when the dilemma involves a choice between interpretations in, say, historical or literary study, or ethics—there may be very valid or pressing reasons for opting either way. Confronting the dilemma, one either makes a choice; or one doesn't. But the choice or non-choice itself cannot be explicable independently of the reasons behind each alternative which make for the difficulty. One could only be caught in what Derrida calls an 'aporia' if the reasons on either side of the matter make pretty much equal sense, or are equally persuasive. To be in a dilemma, then, is not somehow to stand outside the conditions of difficulty. Charles Taylor makes just this point in a consideration of Sartre's anecdote—related in *Existentialism and*

¹⁷ Cited in John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: a study in the thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge 1981) 99.

Humanism—about a young man who is torn between staying at home to look after his ailing mother or leaving to join the Resistance in order to help free his countrymen from oppression.¹⁸ For Sartre, there are no further reasons or criteria by which the young man may decide the matter: he must simply throw himself one way or the other, in what has come to be termed a ‘radical choice’ unswayed by reasons. But, as Taylor argues, his choice—if it is to be a choice at all—must rest upon the worth to the chooser of the reasons that distinguish the alternatives: ‘it is no argument against the view that evaluations do not repose on radical choice that there are moral dilemmas’ (p.30). Sartre’s case only makes Taylor’s point that to be a human agent, one must be capable of ‘strong’ or ‘deep’ evaluations of one’s situation which involve our best self-perceptions and aspirations: our dilemmas tell us this much.

So far, then, I have argued (i) that postmodernists like to indulge in reasoning just as much as the rest of us; (ii) that Davidson makes sense of postmodern ruminations about difference; and (iii) that Taylor shows that we can’t just somehow opt out of evaluations. Spread across all these claims is a more platitudinous case about the conditions for intelligibility. It seems obviously absurd to deny, for example, that some degree (however minimal) of intelligibility, reasoning and relevance must attach to acts of interpretation; that viewpoints must be interpretable; that making sense is impossible without some form of logical or syntactical entailment; that disagreement presupposes some shared understanding; that one cannot stand outside evaluations; that the rejection of foundationalism amounts to an equally ‘foundationalist’ move. But if these conditions are, as I think, simply requisite because we must assume them if we are to begin to make sense, they do not, for all that, dictate to anyone anything about what they should think. As for the politics of the viewpoint I am defending here, I would like to conclude by briefly outlining Taylor’s case about how—if we cannot escape evaluation—we can at least try to practise it equitably. Here we get—very briefly—into a contrastive comparison between the neo-Nietzschean, postmodern ‘politics of difference’ and, what Taylor characterizes as ‘the politics of recognition’.

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, ‘What is human agency?’, in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, 1 (1985) 29-33.

Postmodern concern for highlighting differences between interpretations is often driven by a political aspiration to equalize the rights of groups whose views of interpretations have been excluded or marginalized by mainstream culture. Feminist, black or gay readers of history or literature seek to resist those demeaning self-images which have traditionally been imposed upon them by the male, white, straight hegemony, and some have seen postmodernism as the best way of doing this. In a discussion of the problems posed by multiculturalism for a liberal democracy, Taylor outlines how a 'politics of difference' has emerged historically out of an Enlightenment-Romantic shift towards equality of dignity, a politics deriving from Rousseau and Hegel which today struggles to end discrimination or non-recognition of distinct and worthwhile viewpoints. But this politics of difference encounters a difficulty of seeking, on the one hand, to pursue a collective goal of equal entitlements for ethnic, class or sexual minority interest groups, while, on the other hand, preferring the distinctive contribution these groups make in order to ensure their survival. Taylor's case is that these multicultural imperatives can successfully be negotiated within the framework of a liberal democracy, so long as that democracy is sufficiently flexible to defend certain invariant rights—freedom of assembly, movement, speech, religion, for example—as a matter of procedure, but also remain willing to 'weigh the importance of certain uniform rights against the importance of cultural survival, and opt sometimes in favour of the latter (p.61). Pluralities of viewpoint, whether textual interpretations or expressions of cultural diversity, can thrive, Taylor argues, where distinctions of worth are distributed, exchanged and prioritized by way of inter-cultural recognition, since recognition is crucial to the processes which forge cultural and personal identity (p. 66). Whatever its ethical or political intentions, Taylor suggests, the 'politics of difference' will fail to generate recognition of the contributions of other collectivities or cultures if it rejects all appeal to distinctions of worth.

The key point here is the need for evaluations and considerations of worth—and this, I want to suggest should also include historical perspectives—to go genuinely dialogic. Within a liberal democracy, one can avoid homogenizing cultural differences and at the same time grant

equal respect to multicultural identities, Taylor argues, on the basis of a 'politics of recognition'. (This does not mean, Taylor adds, that liberalism can claim cultural neutrality). Adapting Bakhtin, Taylor maintains that dialogical exchanges in which specific cultures evaluate and recognise the contribution and worth of others provide a genuine basis for mutual respect and critique. Flat declarations of equal worth for all (on grounds, for example, that values are always oppressive), Taylor suggests, risk sounding 'insufferably patronizing' (p.70). So far as cultural groups are concerned, those who contribute a distinctive articulation seek recognition not condescension. But they will not get that recognition, Taylor argues, from the kind of neo-Nietzschean relativism fashionable in postmodern theorizing which simply serves up favourable judgments on demand. Taylor writes,

... the giving of such a judgment on demand is an act of breathtaking condescension. No one can really mean it as a genuine act of respect. It is more in the nature of a pretend act of respect given on the insistence of its supposed beneficiary ... such an act involves contempt for the latter's intelligence. To be an object of such an act of respect demeans. The proponents of neo-Nietzschean theories hope to escape this whole nexus of hypocrisy by turning the entire issue into one of power and counterpower. Then the question is no more one of respect, but of taking sides, of solidarity. But this is hardly a satisfactory solution because in taking sides they miss the driving force of this kind of politics, which is precisely the search for recognition and respect' (p. 70).

On these terms, then, relativism becomes demeaning if it rejects any kind of selectivity as to the worth of contributions or interpretations: 'the politics of difference can end up making everyone the same' (p.71). It must make more sense for a multicultural society, Taylor argues, to see itself as constituted by dialogue about individual rights and collective goals, and pursue non-coercive exchanges about distinctive cultural contributions. Given the differences involved, these contributions could not be identical; nor would they embody the same kind of value. A liberal and multicultural universe, then, is one where different interpretants complement each other with quite different kinds of viewpoint, but one which also demands judgments of

'superiority-in-a-certain-respect'. What the politics of recognition requires, then, is not a spuriously benign attitude of equal worth but a willingness on all sides to enter into contrastive comparisons which, Taylor points out, must displace one's own standards of interpretative value if differences really are to count in making sense of each other's world (p.71).

In her introduction to Taylor's essay, Amy Gutmann points out that the question of reconciling procedures for recognition of identities and respect for different cultural practices is of immense importance to the future interests of such disadvantaged groups as 'women, Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Native Americans, and a multitude of other groups in the United States'.¹⁹ Habermas adds to the list foreigners in Germany, Croats in Serbia, Russians in the Ukraine, Kurds in Turkey, the disabled and homosexuals.²⁰ Doubtless many more additions could be made. Amid so many competing claims for recognition, then, it is hardly surprising if some claim, as they do, that all hope of rational exchange between different communities or viewpoints is forlorn since the norms that would be needed to do so seem inadequate for the task in a multicultural world. The postmodern environment is so characterized by proliferation and dispersion that a principled undecidability would appear to be the only 'norm' left. So Lyotard explains in an interview: 'More and more decisions are made, while at the same time there are no rules. How should I judge today, for example, the act of a criminal who has committed murder? ... There is no justice any more in the sense of a universal legislation that allows us to decide what we must do and what we must allow in all cases'.²¹ I am not suggesting that Lyotard should look to Taylor for an answer to the question, still less for a statement of absolute justice; but Taylor's account of multiculturalism does suggest that we drop the worry about there being 'no rules'. If by that statement Lyotard meant that there are simply too many rules, then who is telling us this and how do they know it—or, to use Rorty talk, why do they speak this way? Few these days would propose some notion of 'universal legislation' but, as Habermas points out, it is one matter to say that there is no longer any

¹⁹ Gutmann in Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism*, 8.

²⁰ Habermas in *ibid.* 110.

²¹ Lyotard in Florian Rotzer, *Conversations with French philosophers*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1995) 77, translated by Gary E. Aylesworth.

substantive consensus on values but quite another to reject all 'consensus on the procedures for the legitimate enactment of laws and the legitimate exercise of power'.²² Neither Habermas nor Taylor assume, however, that cultural differences do not generate real conflicts. It is well, then, to bear in mind that cultures are rarely discrete or homogeneous, and recognition of differences must acknowledge the personal as well as the collective dimension. Hence K. Anthony Appiah's caveat, as a black, gay male, that although collective identities provide life-scripts which individuals use in shaping their own sense of self and future, these should not be, or be read as, 'too tightly scripted'. Why, he asks, should anyone organize their life around their 'race' or sexuality? So, Appiah reminds us, 'between the politics of recognition and the politics of compulsion there is no bright line'.²³ This is why Taylor's insistence that dialogic evaluations must in practice address, qualify, amend, transform and displace one's own perspective is so necessary, if recognition is not simply to endorse long established monolithic structures of oppression.

What, then, can all this mean for the study and interpretation of history? At the level of abstract principle, it means a number of things: first, that the plurality of historical meaning is restricted by the verbal remit that words possess in any instance; second, that historical writings will only make sense under specific logico-syntactical, that is rational, conditions; third, that differences in historical interpretation have less to do with the whirligig of postmodern difference than with evaluative difficulties emerging from a process of inter/intra-cultural dialogue; and fourth, that historical interpretation may prove difficult *de facto* but not impossible *de jure*. But let's get to some specifics. Nowhere has the spin that history must detach itself from the old metaphysics of fact, truth and reason been more forcefully pressed than in post-deconstructive accounts of history as 'a kind of writing' akin to literature in its reliance upon metaphor. I do not wish to go any further over this ground than I have done already, but I do want to show how

²² Habermas, in Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism*, 135. The politics of equality is precisely the question at stake in a debate between Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau in 'The Uses of Equality', *Diacritics* 27 (1997) 3-13; 'Further Reflections on Conversations of our Time', *ibid.* 13-17 and 'Converging on an Open Quest', *ibid.* 17-20.

²³ K. Anthony Appiah, 'Identity, authenticity, survival: multicultural societies and social reproduction', in Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism*, 163.

the question of facticity in history can shape and even limit literary and historical interpretation. The example I wish to take concerns the role of the prostitutes in Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure* (1604). In a very influential book which has done much to bring the work of historians and literary critics closer together, Jonathan Dollimore has argued that the play's action depends upon a constituency of persons which it systematically excludes: namely, its prostitutes: 'we have to recognise the obvious: the prostitutes, the most exploited group in the society which the play represents, are absent from it. Virtually everything that happens presupposes them yet they have no voice, no presence'. Since, for Dollimore, sexual discourse in the early modern period can only ever be exploitative, those who speak for them, he maintains, 'do so as exploitatively as those who want to eliminate them'. In pointing this out, Dollimore himself has been accused of exploiting the very minority of which he speaks since his argument seems only to repeat the absence he deplores. There is, then, a kind of double-bind for any positioned reading of prostitution either in history or in early modern literature. Dollimore pursues his point in a follow-up chapter by insisting on the 'literal silence of the prostitutes in *Measure* ... not one of them actually speaks'. Yet he argues for the need 'to remember them; to recall that their miserable fate has been that of many sexual minorities; to indicate how even the fact of historical effacement can be the point of entry into history'.²⁴

One way of evaluating this powerfully stated interpretation is to look for evidence within history and the literary text to see if the textual silence of prostitutes in this period generally might corroborate its claims. Such evidence is not thick on the ground, and resides, it seems, only in the sketchy, problematic and incomplete legal records that have come down to us from the early modern period. Ruth Karras has done important work on medieval prostitution and Lyndal Roper, Marin Ingram, Ian Archer, Paul Griffiths and Laura Gowing have all made significant contributions to an historical understanding of crime and

²⁴ All quotations are from Jonathan Dollimore, 'Transgression and surveillance in *Measure For Measure* and 'Shakespeare understudies: the sodomite, the prostitute, the transvestite and their critics', in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (ed), *Political Shakespeare: new essays in cultural materialism* (Manchester and New York 1994) 72-88 and 129-52. Quotations are from 86, 136.

prostitution in Shakespeare's period.²⁵ Here, I have not space to enter into the detail of this important work but can merely draw attention to some examples from the Bridewell archive and try to illustrate how historical investigation may help to improve on what we knew before.

Bearing in mind the foregoing theoretical discussion, it is worth pointing out that the official nature of early modern legal records is no guide as to their reliability as fact. Paleographic obscurities, incompleteness, and less than rigorous legal examination all conspire to make the reading of these records a hazardous affair. Yet the Elizabethan Bridewell records can inform us about social conditions, attitudes and legal practice in the sixteenth century.²⁶ In 1553, the dying boy-king, Edward VI, signed the letters patent which made the former King's palace and ambassadorial residence at Bridewell over to the London authorities that the 'idle and lazy vagabonds of the state may be placed and compelled to labour in honest and wholesome employments'.²⁷ Aside from the hemphouse, mill, bakery and nail-house which afforded these conditions of work, the Bridewell 'hospital' rapidly took on the functions and reputation of a 'house of correction' or prison. Indeed, on 23 October 1602, the Bridewell Governors ordered that 'Gabriel Coxe the porter shall for the more credit of this house better look to his charge and keepe this hospitall as a prison with the doores shutt'. The role of the Bridewell was curiously mixed: philanthropic in principle yet austere and punitive in practice. An example from the London Court of Bridewell Minute Books for 1598

²⁵ Ruth Karras, 'The Regulation of brothels in late medieval England', in *Signs*, 14, 21 (1989) 399-433 and *Common women: prostitution and sexuality in medieval England* (Oxford and New York 1996). Lyndal Roper, 'Discipline and respectability: prostitution and the Reformation in Augsburg', in *History Workshop*, 19 (1985) 3-28. Martin Ingram, *Church courts, sex and marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge 1987). Ian W. Archer, *The pursuit of stability: social relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge 1991). Paul Griffiths, 'The structure of prostitution in Elizabethan London', in *Continuity and Change* 8 (1993) 39-63, and *Youth and authority: formative experiences in England, 1560-1640* (Oxford 1996). Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: women, words, and sex in early modern London* (Oxford 1996). See also J. L. McMullan, *The Canting Crew: London's criminal underworld, 1550-1700* (New Brunswick 1984). Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in medieval society: the history of an urban institution in Languedoc* (Chicago and London 1985). P. P. A. Biller, 'Marriage patterns and women's lives: a sketch of pastoral geography', in P. J. P. Goldberg (ed), *Women in medieval English society* (Stroud 1997) 60-107.

²⁶ See especially Archer, *The pursuit of stability* and Griffiths, 'The structure of prostitution' and *Youth and authority*.

²⁷ For the text of the Bridewell charter, see Gordon A. Humphreys, *Goodly heritage: a history of King Edward's School, Witley 1553-1953* (Witley 1953).

aptly demonstrates that sifting 'truth' from 'invention' in the cases they record is no simple process. On Tuesday, 30 May 1598, Margaret and Henry Browne, of Houndsditch in the Parish of St. Botolph, made a series of allegations against her neighbour, Clement Underhill:

Margaret Browne the wife of Henry Browne citizen and stacioner of London dwelling in houndsditch in the parish of St. Botolphe without Bishopsgate in the ward of Bishopsgate London sayeth that uppon the thirteenth daye of this present moneth of Maye 1598 being Saturdaye Michaell fludd and Clement Underhill the wife of John Underhill were making merry together in the house of the said John Underhill being the next house to this deponents house in the parish and ward aforesaid he the said John being from home and as they were eating their victualls Underhills wyfe said unto fludd theis wordes eate no more chease for that it will make your geere hart and I mean to have a good turne of you soone. Ymmediattlye after that he went upp into her chamber and laye uppon her bed and there continued untill sixe of the clocke or thereabouts att what tyme shee shutt in her shopp windowes and went upp unto him with a Rapyer in her hand and asked him whether he had spoken withall his friends or not he came to her and tooke the Rapyer out of her hands laying it A side tooke her in his armes and brought her to the beds feete and tooke up her clothes and she putt her hand into his hose and he kissed her and pulled her uppon him uppon the beds feete And after that they went to the beds side and he taking her in his armes did cast her uppon the bed he pluckt upp her clothes to her thighes she pluckt them upp higher (whereby this deponent sawe not onlye her hose being A Seawater greene colour and also her bare thighes) then he went upp to her uppon the bed and putting down his hose had carnall Copulation with her and having so don he wyped his yard on her Smocke and this deponent had in the meane tyme called upp the said Henrye Browne the husband of this deponent to see deede who came and sawe fludd come from the bed with his hose downe whereuppon this deponents husband sawe the said fludd to go to a payle or a Tubb of water in the same Chamber and washed his yard then Underhills wyfe departed from him to fetch A pott of beere and out of the Cubbord in the table tooke bread and butter wch

they did eate together and then she lifted the pott and said to him heere now I drink to thee.²⁸

The Brownes peeping through their wall have preserved for history a very distinctive scene. Yet any understanding of the deposition in all its difference—its otherness, its strangeness—can only make sense in (what else?) terms of today. The scene requires some translation. A number of details are of interest: the awareness of sexual hygiene between partners, the use of water with which to wash, and perhaps too the energy and character of the accused, details mediated through the voice of the deponent and the recording court scrivener. But there are obscurities also. Little sense can be made of why a rapier should be involved, or who the mysterious, unnamed friends may be, unless these are elaborations designed to add sensation to a more meagre charge. And with an unlikely echo of the Eucharist in the reference to taking beer and bread ('which they did eate') it is possible either that Margaret Browne wished to impute near-blasphemy to her neighbours, or that these profoundly embedded words arose unconsciously in the act of formal deposition. That same day, the court heard Henry Browne's much briefer testimony that he had witnessed 'thorough a great hole the said fludd com from the said Clement of from her bed where she laye with his hose hanging about his legges', and also Michael Fludd's simple confession 'that he hath had thuse and carnall knowledge of the body of the said Clement Underhill'. On these grounds, it was ordered that he merely pay 20 shillings 'towardses the relief of the poore of this hospitall' for his crime. Had Clement Underhill been arraigned, she was likely to have been whipped. Aside, then, from the wider interest of this case, such corroboration as it records tends to rule out an interpretation of the allegation as mere slander.

Margaret and Henry Browne's depositions confirm not the undecidability of establishing the facts of the matter in principle but a practical difficulty of interpretation which also faced the original court hearing, whatever its prejudices. That difficulty is not always insuperable, however, and occasionally cases such as these can serve to clarify or even add to an understanding of the past. Dollimore's claim

²⁸ Bridewell Court Minute Book, 1598-1604, Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum, Beckenham, Kent, f 23r (Tuesday, 30 May 1598).

that the prostitutes of *Measure For Measure* are literally silent closes off one of the play's most significant connections to the social relations of early Jacobean London. For in Act III, Scene ii, Mistress Overdone, once a 'fresh whore' and now a 'powdered bawd', poignantly explains in the play under examination before prison governors the kind of self-help strategies which women had to improvise for themselves under similar circumstances:

Prov. A bawd of eleven years' continuance, may it please your honour.

Mis. O. My lord, this is one Lucio's information against me, Mistress Kate Keep-down was with child by him in the Duke's time, he promised her marriage. His child is a year and a quarter old come Philip and Jacob. I have kept it myself; and see how he goes about to abuse me. (III.ii.190-97)

As William C. Carroll has pointed out, 'the unnamed prison in Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure* is a thinly veiled image of Bridewell'.²⁹ Far from silent, Mistress Overdone voices the insecurities of life among the early seventeenth century underclass. Carried off to prison, her story is abruptly curtailed, but in its plea against defamation, neglect and abuse, the speech voices a history shared by other women, and, as such, obtains a plural dimension. Kate Keepdown's experience parallels that of Mariana who is abandoned in the play by the corrupt deputy Angelo, but it also echoes a pattern of abuse beyond the play. The Bridewell records contain numerous cases of women illicitly got with child by men who were subsequently bound to a form of early modern child support. On Wednesday, 25 June 1598, for example, it was recorded that,

This daye Edward Arrowsmith confeseth that he hath had thuse and carnall knowledge of the body of Hellen Palmer divers and sundry tymes in his fathers house George Arrowsmith dwelling in fleete streete the said Hellen Palmer being also in court confeseth the same to be true ordered that both of them shall be punished which was done

²⁹ William C. Carroll, *Fat king, lean beggar: representations of poverty in the age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca and London 1996) 114. Carroll gathers an extensive range of contemporary references to both the Bedlam and Bridewell institutions for this period in Chap. 3, pp. 97-124.

accordingly and the said Edward was bound with sureties to discharge the parish and the citye of the child.³⁰

And only three weeks later, an examination of Elizabeth Morgan and Reignold Harrison illustrates that Kate Keepdown's experience was a fairly routine problem with which the court had to deal. On Wednesday, 19 July 1598, the Bridewell governors heard that,

Elizabeth Morgan and Reignold Harrison committed to this house by Mr. Deputy Allison the said Elizabeth being examined saith that the said Harrison who is now present hath had the use and carnall knowledge of her bodye divers and sundrye tymes and that the first tyme was about Shrovetide last past and she saith that the said Harrison promised her marriage she now being great with child the said Harrison being also examined whether the same be true or no confesseth it to be true that he hath had thuse and carnall knowledge of her bodye as is aforesaid and that he will marrye her ordered that the said harrison shall putt in sureties for the discharging of the parish and Cittye of the chyld.³¹

These are not isolated cases, for on 18 July 1575, Mawdlin Johnson charged with prostitution, complained that Henry Baynam 'hathe had thuse of her bodie and that he promised her marriage'. Indeed, throughout the Bridewell court records one finds a host of similar cases of single women—usually maidservants or prostitutes—voicing similar complaints. These statements indicate not merely that casual, opportunistic sexual couplings might turn out to be traumatic, risky affairs, but that marriage could be the only recourse for women who otherwise faced destitution, and possibly prostitution, as a consequence of such exploitative behaviour. They also add to our understanding of Shakespeare's play since clearly the prostitutes are not at all silent, either in the play, or in the historical record. Moreover, the words they speak, mediated via other (male) writers, have a poignancy and moral imperative which is uncertain of being heard. We might, then, ask at least two specific questions regarding this episode in the play: why should Shakespeare put these words into the mouth of a prostitute?

³⁰ Bridewell Court Minute Book, 1598-1604, f 26r (Wednesday, June 21 1598).

³¹ Bridewell Court Minute Book, 1598-1604, f 28v (Wednesday, 19 July 1598).

And, on whose behalf does Mistress Overdone speak? The second of these questions, I would hazard, is more important than the first. Certainly, she speaks on her own behalf, and on Kate Keepdown's also—but from the testimonies of Mawdlin Johnson, Hellen Palmer, Elizabeth Morgan and the many others noted in the Bridewell Minute Books, it might reasonably be concluded that she speaks on behalf of innumerable others. In other words, she is, perhaps, the play's most historical voice. Far from merely rehearsing deeply entrenched prejudices against women in general, and prostitutes in particular, the words Mistress Overdone utters complicate our attitude towards the sexual misogyny on which the play is predicated. And so we face the first question regarding authorial intent, for the voice of the prostitute makes it much less easy to assume that such misogyny was an attitude Shakespeare wished to indulge. My point is merely that this is a judgement based upon textual evidence rather than silence. Evidence from history may indeed problematise our attempts at interpretation yet further, but perhaps that could be seen as progress. The more articulate it is possible to be either about history or literature, the more informed and strongly evaluative those studies will be. Here, in these hitherto forgotten, neglected or unheard fragments, history comes to qualify the process of interpretation, to tell us more than we knew already. And even to entertain the possibility of knowing more would, I suggest, be a step forward.

© *Chronicon* 2007 and author