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Fabulous monsters

At the end of the battle with the Lion for the White King's crown in Lewis Carroll's *Through the looking-glass*, the Unicorn catches sight of Alice:

> . . . he turned round instantly, and stood for some time looking at her with an air of the deepest disgust.
>
> 'What—is—this?' he said at last.
>
> 'This is a child!' Haigha replied eagerly, coming in front of Alice to introduce her, and spreading out both his hands towards her in an Anglo-Saxon attitude. 'We only found it to-day. It's as large as life, and twice as natural!'
>
> 'I always thought they were fabulous monsters!' said the Unicorn. 'Is it alive?'
>
> 'It can talk,' said Haigha solemnly.[1]

This passage provides an interesting introduction to a discussion of the representation of people and gender. It is, after all, the task of representation to make what is represented seem, to the viewer, reader or onlooker, 'as large as life, and twice as natural'. And while the object represented may well, like Alice, be able to talk, the representation itself often speaks more powerfully, if not always so overtly.

The Unicorn's epithet, 'fabulous monsters', is also particularly apposite in discussing the representation, across a wide spectrum of cultural texts, of people as social beings. 'Fabulous', in current parlance, indicates something wonderful, glamorous and attractive, while 'monster' signifies rather something grotesque, terrifying and

repellent. Taken thus, the phrase is an oxymoron, its parts appearing to contradict one another.

Etymologically, however, the phrase 'fabulous monster' yields other senses that enable us to explore further the ways that representation contributes to the construction of gender and identity in our culture, as well as their representations. 'Fabulous' derives from the Latin *fabula*, a story or a fable, a narrative frequently characterised by astounding or barely credible themes or details, such as magical objects or powers, or speech by creatures or objects that normally do not speak to humans. The fable might also rework a legend, if by 'legend' we understand a narrative with a kernel of historical fact that custom and retelling have concealed beneath a web of marvellous incident and narrative invention. Fables usually have a point to make: some, like the classical *Aesop's fables*, or those written in the seventeenth century by Jean de la Fontaine, offer a wise proverb or observation about the world and human society; others, like the fables that grew up around the classical myth of Heracles (Hercules, in his Roman manifestation), hold up examples of physical strength and courage and/or moral fortitude for others to admire and emulate.

'Monster', from the Latin *monstrum*, originally meant something that served as a portent or a warning (*monere*: to warn), but later it also came to mean (perhaps by contamination from *monstrare*: to show) something to be put on display and viewed. Shakespeare appears to have both meanings of 'monster' in mind in *Macbeth*, when Macduff jeers at the defeated Macbeth, who refuses to fight:

> Then yield thee, coward,
> And live to be the show and gaze o' th' time:
> We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,
> Painted upon a pole, and underwrit,
> 'Here may you see the tyrant.' (V.viii.23–7)[2]

Similarly, in *The Tempest* Trinculo says of Caliban:

> What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive? A fish: he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of, not of the newest Poor-John [dried hake]. A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted [as on a board at a fair], not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver: there would this monster make a man [i.e. make a man's fortune]; any strange beast there makes a man . . . (II.ii.24–31)[3]

A fabulous monster, then, would seem to be a creature whose very existence is on show, whether as a moral lesson or an

admirable model. We might say that representation, insofar as it offers fabulous monsters to our gaze, constructs models of being-in-society that, on the one hand, invite us to desire and imitate those models which society and ideology approve and, on the other, warn us against other possibilities. And it is here that gender and representation intersect in interesting ways, for if representation shows us ourselves, it also serves the important function of telling us how to be ourselves—as men and women in the culture—which in turn implies a warning: how *not* to be.

Commonsense ideas about representation are often fairly naive in that they assume a close correspondence between the representation and the thing or things represented—hence criticisms of films or novels as not being 'true to life', for example; or of fantasy texts as 'unrealistic' precisely because of their fantasy content. However, representation in fact goes beyond the life-likeness or otherwise of texts: it extends also to social institutions and practices, and the ways that these not only organise our lives but enable us to 'recognise' particular versions of ourselves—as law-abiding citizens, felons, parents, children, teachers, students and so on. Thus, even an 'unrealistic' fantasy tale may represent a moral framework that the reader or viewer recognises (and, in all likelihood, approves of also). J. R. R. Tolkien's epic fantasy novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, operates precisely in this manner: behind the imaginary settings and the cast of hobbits, wizards, elves, orcs and the rest, we can discern certain values familiar to us, values to do with love, trust, loyalty, conservation of ways of life and the sustaining of tradition on the one hand, and on the other, hatred, suspicion, treachery, and the destruction of all familiar traditional beliefs and practices.

Representation, then, is bound up with the culture's ideology. 'Ideology' is a critical concept developed notably by Marxist social theorists to describe the power relationship among social classes; however, the term has been frequently misunderstood in popular speech as signifying an obvious, programmatic system of (someone else's) political beliefs imposed on a population or a fraction of it. Thus, at least until fairly recently, communism was held, in the capitalist West, to be 'ideological', and entire nations—the former Soviet Union, China and others—were believed to be held captive and to ransom by this 'ideology'.

However, this was to miss the point about ideology, namely that *it is ideology's task to make itself invisible* in order that it continue undisturbed to sustain the existing class structure and

the consequent power relations among social groups. It is therefore in the interests of the dominant class to preserve the ideology that enables its dominance; and this is done by establishing and maintaining a system of beliefs and practices that seem natural and inevitable. We should note though that this is often accomplished unconsciously and without deliberate intent by those with a stake in the existing social order. After all, if ideology were really self-evident, it would be easily resisted by those who, though privileged by it, reject its inequities, as well as by those who suffer its oppression.

So in the example of the criticism of communist 'ideology', what was overlooked—because being thought natural it became invisible—was the possibility that neither capitalism nor democracy is to be found in nature. Rather, both capitalism and democracy are themselves as ideological as communism.

The products of culture, whether in the form of works of art or of social institutions (both of which, for brevity's sake, we will include under the rubric of 'text'), are produced within and by ideology. Indeed, their task, is to articulate the culture's ideology to us and to affirm its validity. If they do so successfully, we readily accept the rightness of the ideology presented. Alan Sinfield remarks:

> The strength of ideology derives from the way it gets to be common sense; it 'goes without saying'. For its production is not an external process, stories are not outside ourselves, something we just hear or read about. Ideology makes sense for us—of us—because it is already proceeding when we arrive in the world, and we come to consciousness in its terms. As the world shapes itself around and through us, certain interpretations of experience strike us as plausible: they fit with what we have experienced already, and are confirmed by others around us.

He goes on to observe that

> The conditions of plausibility which determine what we will believe and accept in what is told or represented to us are therefore crucial. They govern our understandings of the world and how to live in it, thereby seeming to define the scope of feasible political change.[4]

However, something else happens in the processes by which ideology is disseminated and assimilated. It is not simply that the currently dominant social organisation of people is perpetuated and protected, and a particular construction of the world preserved, but also that we are given identity within ideology, and

hence enabled to 'find' a place in the social structure—we develop a sense of self, of ourselves as individuals, and of the rightness and inevitability of who we are. To use the terminology of Louis Althusser, we become ideological *subjects*. In a famous passage in his essay 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)', Althusser provides a striking metaphor for the way in which ideology interpellates or hails the individual as a subject:

> . . . ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'
>
> Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed' (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed . . .
>
> . . . The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.[5]

This being the case, argues Althusser, we are always-already in ideology, since it precedes us and will always interpellate us. Thus, we are always-already ideological subjects.

A number of comments should be made about this theorisation of ideology and how it works. The first of these is a clarification: while it may be true that ideology is always-already there, and always-already interpellating us as subjects, it is also true that ideology is not always the same. That is, ideologies may arise, flourish and decay because of differences in historical and cultural conjuncture. The 'Hey, you there!' addressed to women in a traditional Islamic society, for example, necessarily interpellates them differently from the hailing of women in a secular, Western society, especially where feminism may have made significant changes in how women behave and, in turn, how men behave toward them. Likewise, the interpellation of women even in a given Western society, looked at historically, will also show signs of ideological difference as well as similarity.

Such ideological change suggests that, at any given moment

in a society's history, there is a *dominant* ideology which struggles to maintain its ascendancy over a range of *subordinated* ideologies, not all of which of course are necessarily compliant with it. Here, Raymond Williams' three-part distinction among the dominant, the residual and the emergent elements in a culture is a useful way to conceive of the relations between dominant and subordinated ideologies. Williams suggests that the residual, consisting of remnants of the past, both archaic and relatively recent, may be partly appropriated by the dominant in order both to authorise itself (it thus is seen to have a tradition) and to solicit the support of conservatively inclined groups in the culture. The emergent, by contrast, is generated by significant new social processes and movements, and is not merely novel.[6]

Williams' analysis points up an important difficulty with Althusser's formulation, useful as it is for an analysis of the way ideology saturates all social levels: that is, its implication of a monolithic ideology running uniformly if secretively throughout the social structure. This, in turn, suggests that resistance to such ideological coercion is useless, not only because so much of it is covert but also because, being monolithic, ideology is immovable. Althusserian theory therefore has difficulty explaining ideological change in a culture, short of positing social cataclysm through revolution or some other form of wholesale and presumably conscious process of ideological substitution. However, not all societies have been politically so unstable, yet their dominant ideologies have changed.

Texts thus cannot, in general, encode only one ideological perspective, namely the dominant ideology, because that already implies other subordinated and potentially (if not actually) subversive ideologies. Textual representation, therefore, may be thought of as *ideologically overloaded*, and it is therefore of concern to those social institutions which serve the dominant ideology that the overload be controlled by preferring and privileging certain facets of it, and ignoring, silencing or disparaging others. This is, as Sinfield argues, one of the tasks, if not indeed the chief task, of normative criticism: to foreground the understanding of a text which shores up the dominant ideology and the social structure which stands behind it (see Sinfield, 1992, pp. 1–28).

Therefore, when we read a text of whatever kind, we must bear in mind that the ideology in which its creator lived and wrote, and which is articulated in and by the text, may have

changed. It may therefore differ significantly in a number of respects from the ideology with which we are familiar and which makes the social world familiar to us. This does not mean that in order to read Shakespeare, we must first become scholars of English Renaissance culture—though that would doubtless enrich our understanding of the text's meaning. Still less does it mean that we are absolutely forbidden to read a Shakespeare play in terms of our own ideological assumptions—indeed, we cannot help but do this. But it does mean that we should be sensitive to possible ideological anachronisms of our own imposition as we make our way through the text.

Althusser's theory of ideology is not invulnerable to other criticisms. His idea of interpellation is embedded in a larger hypothesis about state apparatuses, specifically: ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and repressive state apparatuses (RSAs). ISAs include social institutions, such as the family, religion, education and the law (as a complex code of permissible social behaviours and practices); while RSAs include modes of enforcement, such as the police, the military and the law (as a means of coercion and punishment for infractions of the legal codes). Each kind of state apparatus is implicated in the other in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. It is important to understand, however, that the imposition of these apparatuses is not accomplished in serial fashion; that is, the RSAs are not invoked only when the ISAs fail. Rather, as we can see in the case of the law, which straddles both kinds of apparatuses, the ISAs lend legitimacy to the RSAs, while the latter guarantee compliance by subjects with the former. Thus, the legal codes have force only insofar as they are backed up by a large and forbidding machinery of law courts and officers of the law, together with disciplinary institutions such as reformatories and prisons. And these have propriety of status only insofar as they are seen as serving the judiciary and other ISAs.

This formulation in effect denies political agency to social subjects. That is, Althusser's theory suggests not only that we are irresistibly and unknowingly coerced into acceptance of a dominant ideology, but also that we are actually complicit in that coercion—we acquiesce in our own *subjection* (reduction to subordinate status) as well as our own *subjectivation* (attainment of subjectivity within and through ideology). The implications of this for the reading of culture and of cultural texts are important, for it would seem to indicate—just as in older and cruder versions of Marxist criticism (what Terry Eagleton calls 'vulgar Marxist'

readings[7])—that all texts may finally be reduced to the same meaning: the oppression of other classes by one dominant class, and hence the subjection of the individual through the process of subjectivation. If this were the case, then we read the same story over and over again; only the superficial plot situations, the settings and the characters are different. However, literary and cultural critics have produced such multifarious interpretations of texts as to suggest that ideology does not work so simply, forcefully and irresistibly as Althusser's framing of the issue might be taken to indicate.

Michel Foucault offers an alternative way of thinking about this matter in his notion of discourse, which also allows us to avoid the cumbersome phrases 'dominant ideology' and 'subordinate ideologies'. It is important, however, to bear in mind that Foucault's work does not quite run on all fours with Marxist theories of ideology, chiefly because Foucault's is an epistemological investigation (i.e. to do with knowledge), rather than a purely sociological or historical one.

Though 'discourse' is derived from a word meaning 'speech (about something)', in the terminology of much current theory, and especially that of Foucault, the term has come to signify the network of social, political and cultural relationships, including those created by language, which provide the relays for the circulation and dispersal of power across and throughout the social structure. To speak, therefore, of a discourse of gender is not merely to identify gender as a cultural topic, as it were; it is also to signal that gender is implicated in power relationships that go beyond the fundamental distinctions of male/female or masculine/feminine and take in social as well as historical formations of the concept. Foucault's work is dedicated to identifying such formations and to tracing the trajectories which power relationships have taken across them, as well as how power has been central in *constituting* those realities.

A discourse, then, develops both out of and within the historical experience of a culture. Thus, though we may think that a particular discourse—say, that of sexuality—appears to be constant throughout a culture's history, if we pay attention to the terms of the discourse at given historical points, we will find that the social and cultural meanings attached to particular aspects of the discourse have varied. This, in turn, implies something about the ways power is distributed along and through the discourses that intersect with or converge upon that of sexuality. Think, for

instance, how in our culture heterosexuality is the dominant sexuality, and what that means *socially, legally and politically* for homosexuals and bisexuals, both male and female. The dominance of heterosexuality also has implications regarding the relative empowerment or disempowerment of men and women generally in the culture, since—especially in a patriarchal culture—hetero-sexuality may be thought of not only as a sexual desire for the other sex, but also as a matter of who penetrates whom, and what that might mean in social and ideological terms. This issue becomes still more complex in the presence of technologies which can alter the original sex of the subject (or, as many gender dysphorics assert, which can restore the sex felt by the subject to be the 'right' or 'appropriate' one).

These differences in meaning are the result of differences in what Foucault calls the *episteme* on which a particular discourse is centred, and which actually helps to shape the discourse. Foucault describes his project thus:

> . . . what I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field, the *episteme* in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility . . .[8]

Briefly to explain this perhaps not very transparent passage: Foucault proposes to trace the conditions by and within which we, as members of a culture at a particular historical moment, 'know' about the world; he is not concerned to assess the truth or validity of that knowledge. The episteme, then, differs from what another theoretical and critical tradition has called a culture's world view, that is, a system of knowledges and beliefs which makes sense of the world to the members of that culture. (With chapter titles like 'Order', 'Sin', 'The chain of being', 'The cosmic dance', E. M. W. Tillyard's 1943 *The Elizabethan world picture*, a staple for many generations of students of Renaissance literature, provides an exemplary case.)[9] Rather, the episteme is that which actually shapes that world view and makes it possible. Thus, an epistemic analysis seeks to identify, first, the *categories of thought* pervading a culture at a given historical point; and, second, *their configuration or constellation* (including their relationship to one another) as typical of or central to the culture at that time.

We can understand this better by way of an example of the sort which Foucault himself discusses in the second chapter of

The order of things. In our epistemic world, the things of nature, whether animate or inanimate, can be classified by genus and species. Thus, when we see, say, a snake, we identify it as belonging to a particular class of animal (reptiles), and we categorise it as different not only from other animal classes (mammals, birds), but also from inanimates like stones or trees. We might also identify it in terms of whether it is a domestic or a non-domestic animal. Our system of classification and identification would, moreover, be considerably sharpened if we had a good working knowledge of biology or zoology—we would then be able to invoke classes like vertebrate/invertebrate, and so on.

However, what if we lived in an epistemic world in which snakes, along with other animals and objects, were given other, perhaps more mystical meanings? This was precisely the case in the Middle Ages. For instance, a twelfth-century bestiary (book of beasts) introduces the topic of the snake thus:

> Believe it, SNAKES have three odd things about them. The first odd thing is that when they are getting old their eyes grow blind, and if they want to renovate themselves, they go away somewhere and fast for a long time until their skins are loose. Then they look for a tight crack in the rocks, and go in, and lay aside the old skin by scraping it off. Thus we, through much tribulation and abstinence for the sake of Christ, put off the old man and his garment. In this way we may seek the spiritual rock, Jesus, and the tight crack, i.e. the Strait Gate.[10]

To dismiss this and the rest of the account in the bestiary as the erroneous ramblings of a pre-modern, pre-scientific culture whose individuals failed to observe accurately would be mistaken. As Foucault argues, the cultural episteme shapes not only the discourse, but the way in which knowledge can be gained and 'thought'. In a world which was understood to be a system of interlocking similarities and allusions, all governed ultimately by reference to God, the simple natural (that is, biological) fact of a snake, as we understand it, was not available. Instead, nature was perceived to provide humanity, first, with lessons about the way in which God had made the world; and, second, with instruction in Christian morality and ethics. Questions about the species or genus into which a snake might be classified were therefore minor—if not, indeed, entirely irrelevant—compared with the issue of deciding what lesson about good or evil we might learn from the snake.

Thomas Laqueur's Foucaultian study of the discourses of body

and gender, *Making sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud*, provides another helpful and fascinating example.[11] His research indicates that prior to the eighteenth century it was commonly held that, though there were two *genders* (masculine and femi-nine), there was, biologically, only one *sex*. This was because, from the time of the Greeks until the late Renaissance, the female genitalia were understood to be simply the (inferior) inverse of the male. As Laqueur observes, it is not that empirical experience through autopsies and anatomy lessons failed to teach people anything different, but rather that the way in which people *thought* caused them to *see* (to 'know') in certain ways—ways which we today no doubt find utterly foreign, because our own epistemic view of things is so different.

A discourse, then, shapes the way in which the experience of individuals is perceived and given meaning. Indeed, we might say that a discourse, given the episteme on which it is based and by which it is informed, allows us to see in certain ways and not in others. We then operate within the field of a particular *discursive practice*, in that the cultural discourses available to us—and they are many—prompt us to accept and emulate or to reject and condemn certain behaviours or attitudes; these discourses also blind us to other behaviours and practices, so that to all intents and purposes these latter may not even exist for us.

Social or cultural discourse, then, determines *what* can be spoken about, and in what terms and with what sorts of values. It also determines *who* has the authority to speak about and to whom, and who can only be spoken to. Thus, the opinions of congregants or patients are not usually welcomed or treated with the same seriousness as those—such as divines or doctors—who are authorised to speak and empowered by the relevant discourses. In addition, it determines *where* and *when* the topic can be addressed (always and everywhere or only in certain situations and under particular conditions). In this way, sites of power and authority are established within any individual discourse.

It is here that Foucault's theory allows some overlap with theories of ideology. We may understand discursive practices to be ideological, insofar as they tend to reflect and support the discourses of the dominant social class or group. Indeed, several ideologies may be encoded in a particular discourse: the discourse of gender, for instance, embraces both patriarchal ideology, which assumes the physical, sexual, social and political supremacy of men over women, and ideologies that resist that dominance—

feminist, gay/queer, anti-sexist and so on—as well as ideologies governing social position and power.

At the same time, however, the coalescence of multiple ideologies within a single discursive practice allows not only for variety (which is why we don't all think exactly alike within a given discourse) but also for contradiction and conflict. This, in turn, indicates that power is distributed unequally (and inequitably) through the culture. Therefore Foucault, unlike Althusser, acknowledges the emergence and presence of dissenting or resistant discourses, and indeed argues that any dominant discourse necessarily produces a resistant discourse.

For when Foucault speaks about power and power relationships, he does not mean simply the overt exercise of strength or will by an individual or a group upon another individual or group. Rather, *power is part of the way that social relationships and configurations are actually structured*: 'power is exercised from innumerable points'.[12] The very way the family, the smaller and larger social groups, and social and political institutions are structured and function produces nodes or sites of power which influence the way in which we behave, think and 'know'.

However, as Foucault so elegantly points out, power is power only where it can be exercised over sites of dissent and/or resistance:

> Where there is power, there is resistance . . . [The] existence of [power relationships] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat . . . They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. (1978, pp. 95–6)

Such resistance in turn creates counter-discourses which often function to subvert the dominant discourse, and thus themselves acquire a different, oppositional power, through the threat posed to the dominant discourse in question and to the group or groups

which it privileges. Feminism and the women's movements may thus be said to have constituted a counter-discourse to resist the dominant discourses of masculinity and patriarchy in the culture; likewise, homosexuality and bisexuality, both male and female, constitute a site of resistance which subverts the dominant discourse of pure heterosexuality by revealing an alternative sexuality and sense of the erotic, as well, often, as a different lifestyle. As counter-discourses, they persistently show, by challenging the dominant discourses, the ideological illogicalities, gaps and injustices in those discourses which, of course, try to operate as if natural, inevitable, equitable and normal.

The discursive frames generally deemed powerfully influential in the construction of subjectivity are those of race, class, age and gender (this last term often being made to include issues of sexuality, which, however, arguably form a separate yet equally significant category). The dominant group—whether Caucasians in Australia or the middle class in capitalist societies, or the younger, more affluent age groups targeted by producers in consumerist societies, or men generally in Western culture—develops discourses which confer authority on some, but not on all, members of the society. Those deprived of that authority become social Others, as opposed to the 'I' of the subject, who has a sense of the significance of self through an authorised and empowered social identity and position. The sense of self of those Others—Aborigines, Asians or other non-Anglo ethnicities, working-class people, the elderly, women—is correspondingly unauthorised and disempowered. In Althusserian terms, those Others are also ideological subjects, but they have been interpellated in ways which generally coerce them to accept the status of *inferior* subjects.

Shakespeare again offers an insightful example of this in his tragedy *Othello*. Othello's elopement with Desdemona, the daughter of the Venetian senator Brabantio, becomes the occasion of scandal and gossip, and of intervention by the state in the person of the Doge of Venice. It is important to note here that there are *two* reasons for the disturbance, and both of these, though couched in terms of love/non-love, respect/non-respect and so on, really have to do with social identity and subjectivity. Those reasons are, first, Desdemona's disobedience as a daughter in running away with the man she loves: this act redraws the social relationship between Brabantio and Desdemona, and in effect puts the daughter beyond the father's control (though it also—and with tragic consequences—puts Desdemona within her husband's power).

13

Second, the fact that Othello is black is not merely coincidental detail. To be a stranger in a particular society positions one in certain ways, while to be visibly different has further implications of an ideological kind. Othello first appears as a social alien who, *despite his difference*, has secured a socially central position commanding respect and honour. As a former slave (I.iii.138), he has had to work much harder for that position than a Venetian might have had to. However, the extreme precariousness of this prominence—which, in a racist discourse, might be viewed as improper, untenable and/or undeserved—is demonstrated in the unfolding of the play's action. Though in the eyes of Venice, Othello may remain a commander—indeed, Lodovico and the other envoys to Cyprus are both puzzled and perturbed by Othello's apparent distemper (IV.i)—in the audience's view (for we have seen Iago working upon the Moor's peace of mind), Othello shifts from the social centre to the margins. This is an exile engineered by Iago, whose machinations create out of Othello (read: strip the veneer of civilisation from the Moor to reveal) a savage (non-European) driven by jealousy to murder his wife.[13]

Desdemona, when challenged by her father, unequivocally states, 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind' (I.iii.252); that is, the colour of his skin was of no account to her in comparison with his other virtues. Yet later, on Cyprus, Iago's rhetoric about miscegenation (racial intermarriage) is sufficiently persuasive that the perplexed Othello himself advances as one reason for his wife's supposed infidelity to him the fact of his own racial inferiority: 'Haply [perhaps], for [because] I am black . . . ,' he sadly reflects (III.iii.267). This example allows us to see how cultural discourses are also ideological, for Iago, in voicing a particular discourse of race, acts as agent for the interpellation of Othello as the inferior Other—inferior, that is, to the white Venetians who have honoured the Moor.

The constellation of the discourses of race, class and gender as central to the fashioning of subjectivity shows how discourses may, and often do, intersect with others, or run alongside one another. The individual's sense of the integrated self—of one's sense of unity as a subject—is thus actually made up of the intersection of many discourses, some of which may exist in contradictory relation to one another. These pre-exist us in the culture, and in order to function and survive in that culture, we must learn them, whether through formal or informal processes

(the instruction of children by parents by their behaviour, or of students by teachers in terms of a formally taught ethics—for instance, about how to behave towards people of another race, religion or sexuality); through dominant social practices and behaviours (including what the law of the society defines as licit or illicit); or through language itself, for language encodes many of these discourses for us. And all of these, in turn, are part of the ideology of the culture.

Another way of putting this is to say that as subjects—that is, as individuals with a sense of self—we are constituted through language, through what the culture enables and allows us to 'think' epistemically, and through our positions in the social structure. These factors necessarily, therefore, involve sex difference, gender behaviour, differences in social class, intellectual difference, polit-ical allegiances, even philosophical affiliations, sexual preference and practice, and so on. All these aspects of our identities develop through our interaction in the various groups through and within which we move, and with which or against which we identify ourselves.

A series of three commercials aired on Australian television in 1994 and 1995 show how ideological discourses not only converge in particular texts, but may also exist in a contradictory relation to one another. The product advertised was Underdaks, a label for men's underpants manufactured by the Holeproof company. The 'narrative' in each of the three commercials is identical: the scene is set in an airport—at the scanning device through which passengers must pass to check they do not carry any dangerous devices. The scanner is supervised in the commercials by a woman security officer who stands with one hand in the pocket of her uniform trousers (this turns out to be significant in the unfolding of the text's narrative). A handsome, well-built young man walks through the scanner's gateway and a buzzer sounds. The officer orders him to remove his shirt, which he does; but when he proceeds once more through the gateway, the buzzer sounds again. The officer now requires him to remove his pants: he looks at her in exasperated disbelief, but complies, striding through the gateway, this time without further incident. As he passes by the officer, he looks down at her with an expression combining smug triumph and challenging insolence. The entire episode has been watched by another female security officer operating a different scanner; she comes over to the first officer, reaches into her pocket

and removes an electronic device which, we now learn, can be made to set off the scanner's alarm. 'One day you're gonna get caught', she tells the first officer. (This is an allusion to the slogan used to sell this product in the 1980s, when the commercials showed various young men who, dressed only in their underpants, were inadvertently exposed to the public gaze, because they had become accidentally locked out of their rooms, or mistaken a department store window for a changing room. The denouement was accompanied by a male chorus warning, 'One day you're gonna get caught . . . with your pants down'.)

The camera next switches to a view of the young man, still clad only in his underpants, striding down the corridor to the transit area, carrying his luggage. He pauses just before turning right and out of view of the camera, and looks back briefly—we presume at the two women officers. There is again the impression of triumph and challenge in his gaze. As we watch him disappear from sight, we hear the final line of the commercial, spoken by the first officer, and it is this that differs in each of the versions. In 1994, two versions were, suggestively, 'Nice . . . luggage', and

Pic01

Pic02

Pic03

forlornly 'He's probably gay'. In 1995, the closing line was 'One day I'm gonna get lucky'.

What makes these commercials remarkable is the representation of the male body as docile to female command and as available to the female gaze—a reversal, of course, of the traditional power relationship under patriarchy, where it is woman who obeys man, and offers her body to him, whether as object to be looked at, object to be touched and fondled, or object to be entered sexually. That docility, however, also makes the male body available to the *male* viewer.

The advertising industry has rarely flirted in the past with the notion of homoeroticism and scarcely even hinted at the presence of a gay consumer-population. One notable example that suggested there might be a shift to inviting a homoerotic reading was the mid-1980s Sheridan bed linen advertisement. This offered to the Australian viewer a barely concealed nude male body, and though the pretext may have been heterosexual desire (the advertisement was ostensibly aimed at women, the presumed purchasers of bed linen for the home), the advertisement found a particularly enthusiastic audience among gay men. (A similar phenomenon occurred in the United States with the Calvin Klein advertisements for men's underwear, particularly those which used the singer Marky Mark as the model.)

On the whole, however, the gay sector of the population has rarely been directly addressed or presented positively. Much more typical has been the Australian television commercial for Décoré hair products which showed a presumably gay hairdresser becoming almost hysterical because a client had used a Décoré product to colour and highlight her hair herself, instead of relying on his expertise. Thus the familiar stereotype of the homosexual as over-emotional (and hence not to be thought of as masculine) and as engaged in 'artistic' pursuits (in this case, the cutting and colouring of women's hair—likewise not generally thought of as a masculine profession) are re-invoked, and presented as a cause for amusement to the viewing public. In this context, therefore, these three Underdaks commercials courageously broke new ground in cultural representations of gender and sexuality.

This is, however, to look at the commercials from the ideological position privileged and preferred by the texts themselves. Precisely the fact that this position *is* privileged and preferred should alert us to the possibility that other ideological positions may also be present but masked. The stage conjuror provides a

Pic04

Pic05

useful comparison with the way ideology often works: we are disposed to take the appearance and disappearance of objects in his hand and on his person as wonderful, inexplicable. But this 'magic' is really trickery, sleight of hand: the conjuror either distracts us by his patter or directs our attention to the hand or part of the body or sector of the stage where nothing is really happening, while elsewhere his hand or hands are busy extracting objects from places of concealment or secreting them there. So also ideology will often direct our attention to an operation or a discourse that may be unremarkable, even quite ordinary or acceptable, or, as in this case, fairly novel and controversial. It thus hides from us another operation or discourse that is the real ideological objective or function.

In the Underdaks commercials, we can discern initially two ideological operations. The first and most obvious we might categorise as the politically correct one, that is, the taking account of developments in feminism and women's increasingly high profile in the culture. These texts thus emphasise female desire for and the feminine gaze upon the male body. This is signalled not only by the events in the 'narrative', but also by the final dialogue of each version: 'Nice . . . luggage' draws our attention to the body of the young man, and specifically to his genital area, which we have earlier seen concealed/revealed by a close-up of his crotch as he removes his pants. Interestingly, the label on the cover of the videotape of the 1994 commercials provided to me by The Campaign Palace, the advertising agency responsible, gives the title as 'Packed lunch—gay/luggage'. While 'packed lunch' usually denotes a meal of sandwiches or the like to be taken to work or school, 'lunch' in Australian gay slang can also refer to the male genitals, as in 'to show one's lunch' or 'to look at someone's lunch'. In the present context, then, a 'packed lunch' signifies a well-filled male crotch. The title thus neatly encapsulates both the final slogans of the two versions of the commercial: 'Nice . . . luggage' and 'He's probably gay'; it may also refer to the way the underpants themselves are designed and cut to make the genitals more prominent.

The line 'Nice . . . luggage' also permits the sort of *double entendre* so beloved in much British comedy: that is, it both articulates female desire—or at any rate the desire of one woman— and denies it. In order to understand the line's erotic signification, we must first understand the coding that surrounds the significant pause before 'luggage' and be prepared to read an erotic sense

into 'luggage' itself. Second, we may perceive the young man to be out of earshot of the women, so that the line sounds like the sort of confidence women might exchange privately with one another. However, if the line is taken at face value only, it conceals and refuses the idea of female desire.

'He's probably gay' signals at once the desirability of the male body being surveyed and its inaccessibility to female desire. The line also adverts to what has purportedly been the cry of many women, especially in Sydney, namely, that 'All the good/attractive/sexy men are either married or gay'. The line thus articulates heterosexual female desire but renders it futile or impotent at the same time.

The line 'One day I'm gonna get lucky' suggests a female sexual appetite untrammelled by the constraints normally placed upon female desire under patriarchy; indeed, 'to get lucky' has customarily been used by men to signify success in their sexual pursuits, so its use in this context indicates an appropriation by a female subject of the independence and fabled voraciousness of male sexual desire. Yet the very articulation of female desire in this case also marks that desire as frustrated—and indefinitely so, since 'One day' refers to an indistinct future date which, because of its very lack of certainty, may be infinitely deferred.

Female sexual desire is intricately bound up in discourses not only of gender and sexuality but also of social structure. Much feminist writing—for instance, that of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray—focuses on the differences between male and female sexual desire, and explores the latter in various ways, for instance, through *écriture féminine* (feminine writing).[14] What emerges from the work of these theorists and others is that female sexual desire has often traditionally been a focus of conflicting beliefs, as the dichotomy between woman as either virgin or whore reveals. Jeffrey Weeks shows that in nineteenth-century Britain classifications of female sexuality and desire were often divided along class lines, and underlain by Darwinian notions of evolution. Thus, working-class women were thought of as sexual beings because they were more animal (less civilised, hence less evolved) than their middle-class sisters—and it was working-class women who made up most, if not all, of the population of prostitutes in London and the larger cities.[15] It was amongst these that middle-class men tended to 'sow their wild oats' (an interestingly agrarian and hence 'primitive' metaphor); and it was these women who figured prominently in the pornographic literature of the nineteenth

century. Middle-class women, by contrast, were ideologically con-ceived as virtually asexual, because they were more highly evolved. Indeed, the physician William Acton believed that 'The best mothers, wives and managers of households know little or nothing of sexual indulgence.'[16] Such women's real desire, then, was for maternity—sex was merely the means to that end. (Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of perversity: fantasies of feminine evil in fin-de-siècle culture*, an exploration of the art and literature of the late nineteenth century in Europe, provides interesting examples of the fascination with and fear of female sexuality.)

Female desire in a patriarchal culture is constructed as depend-ent on male desire, much as a satellite is dependent for its orbit upon the gravitational force of a larger planetary body. The possibility that female desire may be independent of male desire is threatening to contemplate for men in such a culture, for if female desire resists the dominance of male desire, it also resists, both implicitly and explicitly, the patriarchal structure and the way in which this locates woman as subordinate to man.

The full meaning of the Underdaks commercials depends on such a discursive and ideological context. While these texts may invoke in an overt and obvious manner the presence of a feminist discourse and recent cultural history which has seen women take an unusual ascendancy through that discourse, the commercials, as we have seen, present female desire ambiguously, offering it to the viewer but at the same time withholding, concealing or nullifying it. Thus, the commercials both construct and deconstruct female sexual desire, and by simultaneously foregrounding and neutralising the danger it represents to patriarchy, make it comic and 'safe'. Woman may experience sexual desire, but ultimately—so the commercials suggest—it is impotent, and so is she. The sacrifice required (of men) by political correctness—by the recog-nition of feminist politics—is thus in fact countermanded and redeemed by a different dynamic which restores the traditional ideological and social balance (or inequity).

The second ideological operation in the series of commercials is similarly ambiguous and for similar reasons, here centring on issues of power rather than desire. Within the diegetic (narrative) frame, the first woman officer both represents power and exercises it. Her uniform *symbolises* the power—directly that of the airport authority, but more generally and diffusely also that of the state—which invests her with power and authorises her actions. And in her function as supervisor and observer of the licitness or

otherwise of passengers, she *exercises* power—even, it would seem, to the extent of being able to require a passenger progressively to remove his clothing. At one level, therefore, woman is represented as empowered and authoritative; and in this respect we are in the presence once more of an overt ideology of feminist politics. We should note, too, that in the officer's assumption of the authority to demand that the young man strip, the discourse of overt, authorised power converges with that of sexual desire.

However, the second security officer confirms for us that the first officer's requirement of the young man is *not* in fact authorised by the power symbolised by the uniform ('One day you're gonna get caught'). This disclosure has the effect of diminishing still further the officer's apparent authority: she now seems much more a maverick functionary or agent of state power than a wielder of official power in her own right.

Moreover, though the overt objective of having the young man strip is to make him vulnerable by opening up his near-naked body to the female gaze, the narrative instead substitutes a different effect, namely, rendering that body resistant to that gaze, so that it both challenges and triumphs over it and implicitly also over female desire. The man's body is taut and muscular, signifying physical strength and power; the close-up of his crotch suggests that he has large genitals, symbolising sexual dominance and potency; and his return of the officer's gaze may be described as proud, confident, even insolent, suggesting that while he may comply with her order, because of the authority with which she is apparently invested, he remains indomitable: he cannot be cowed by her. That he remains intrinsically independent of her authority, as well as implicitly rejecting it, is shown by his strolling, still in his underwear, in leisurely fashion away from her, rather than hurriedly climbing back into his clothes: he thus converts an ostensible humiliation into his own victory and, at the same time, continues to flaunt his body, inaccessible to the officer, to her desiring gaze. His backward look, as he turns down the corridor, suggests that he is aware that she and possibly also her fellow officer continue to look at him as he distances himself from the site of his intended humiliation.

Read in the ways suggested above, this text in its three variants may be seen to invert the dominant/subordinate relationship between ideologies. It subscribes overtly to an ideologically subordinate position—that of the feminist—which it then presents as acceptable, because politically correct and because it is intended

to appeal to women viewers and—presumably—to men who sympathise with feminist politics. Yet that position is really still dissident within patriarchy. The fact of its dissidence is made clear when we understand that underlying the commercial is a further, more covert ideological position which is really traditional and patriarchal: in the end, the commercial seems to suggest, it is still men who control the world and its women.

The commercial thus serves usefully to show how a single text may encode at least two mutually contradictory, even antagonistic ideological positions within a single discourse—here, that of gender relations (we will see later that other ideological and discursive positions are also present). It is not necessary to deduce from this a sort of conspiracy between the manufacturer and the advertising agency that ran the campaign—to suppose that in some smoke-filled back-room somewhere in Melbourne a plot was cynically hatched by powerful businessmen to dupe Australian women into the delusion that the end of patriarchy is at hand, while at the same time secretively signalling to men that business will continue as usual—though our analysis of the commercials might seem to suggest exactly that. Cynicism of some sort there no doubt is, if only because the business of persuading people to buy products is itself a cynical one; moreover, since it seems that women are the more frequent purchasers of men's under-wear—for their menfolk, one supposes—there is also a measure at least of irony, if not also of cynicism, in addressing this sector of the buying public in the terms of feminist politics. But the important point is that ideological operations are shifty and complex, and they are all the more powerful in the ways that they may be layered over and under one another, in order to sustain and control the dominant order of things in society. Textual representations both reflect and articulate this; and are powerful agents in the discursive dissemination of ideology in the workaday lives of people.

This is exemplified in the responses to the commercials received by Holeproof. In 1994, the company set up a toll-free telephone number for members of the public to register their comments on the first of the commercials. Those comments mostly fell into the following categories:

- approval of a feminist position which recognises that women and female desire have been traditionally repressed by patri-archal social practices (this category includes those responses from anti-sexist and New Age men);

- hostility towards the use of the male body as object of the gaze (this category contains two principal subcategories: responses from women who criticise the commercial for applying to men the same technique that has abased women for centuries, and responses from men who resent the feminisation of the male body through this technique);
- amusement occasioned by the reversal of the gendered subject–object relationship with regard to the gaze; approval of the suggestion that gay men are attractive objects of the gaze, even to women; and
- open—indeed, on occasion, violent—homophobia, caused apparently by the mere mention of the word 'gay'.

This variety of responses suggests that, ideologically, the commercials were very successful, for even the negative rejecting responses to elements in the text are themselves indications of the reinforcement of the viewers'/callers' own ideological positions, challenged by the apparent progressiveness of the overt ideological message. Thus, whether the Holeproof company successfully sells its product mainly to women who feel that they have been positively interpellated by the commercials, or to men who, though perhaps initially alarmed at the ideological trend of the commercials' narrative line, in the end feel interpellated in familiar and comforting ways, the advertising campaign nonetheless managed to confirm the ideological position (whether we would describe it as progressive, politically correct, traditional or reactionary) of each viewer.

To sum up: subjectivity—that is, the sense of self—is bound up in social and cultural discourses which allocate to individuals the authority to 'speak' certain topics in particular ways. Such discourses necessarily therefore privilege certain kinds of subjectivity—for instance, white, male, Christian, heterosexual—while de-privileging others, so that people in the subordinated category are pressed to acquiesce in their own disempowerment. The point to note here is that dominant discourses of a culture seek to present themselves as inevitable, normal, natural, even universal.

Hence, whenever we read a novel or a newspaper, watch a television sitcom or a dramatic film, listen to the radio or to our teachers, interact with our parents or our friends, a number of cultural discourses are being marshalled and combined in complex and subtle ways. Subjectivity is created or, as it were, un-created; power shifts from individual subject to individual subject, or from

group to group, and the culture's dominant (or privileged) ideologies are articulated and reinforced. The representation of subjectivities, therefore, in whatever medium—the media of print, radio, television and film are particularly powerful, because popular—will inevitably draw on the available cultural discourses of gender, race, class, age and the like—in short, on those discursive elements which make up our sense of self, and which therefore contribute to our sense that we are unique.

This works, first, to naturalise the discourses, subjectivities and ideologies of the culture, so that the individual person comes to think in a particular range of ways, and to think a range of particular things—*and believes that the way s/he perceives things to be is normal, natural and universal.* As members of the culture, therefore, we are always subject to a bombardment which is the more subtle because largely invisible and apparently silent, a bombardment which continually invites us or orders us to behave in certain ways or take the consequences. And the consequences can range from the relatively insignificant—think, for example, of the flood of jokes about feminist women or homosexual men—to the physically threatening and dangerous: socially, legally and industrially prejudicial action against citizens, or actual physical violence inflicted on the bodies of individuals.

Second, the articulation and reiteration of certain discourses which both produce and are produced by cultural representations of subjectivity function as a mirror by which we may confirm our own subjectivity in the culture, and hence our power (or lack of it), our sense of identity, and our place in the social structure. In this respect, such representation helps us to imagine ourselves as *self*-fashioned and -fashioning through our identification of a particular set of traits or behaviours, the modelling of ourselves on an individual or group who seem to embody this trait, or through our sense of feeling 'authenticated' when we are successfully interpellated by a particular (and especially ideologically approved) representation. Representations of subjectivity, which must, of course, include representations of sexual and gender behaviour, are thus very powerful and important factors in our day-to-day living in the culture, and contribute significantly to the ways in which we get on—or not—with our fellow beings.

Representation, however, is not always a straightforward articulation of the ideologies and discourses of a culture. Because, as we have seen, these are multiple, and are constelled in many different ways, cultural products often become sites of contesting

ideologies and discourses, though the dominant ideological con-
figuration of course will prefer and privilege certain understandings
and readings over others. Nonetheless, read against the grain,
cultural products can frequently be shown to encode an ideological
excess, a mass of contradictory ideological impulses and impera-
tives: hence the richness, whether actual or only potential, of
interpretation of cultural texts.

For this reason Sinfield observes that:

> . . . the texts we call 'literary' characteristically address contested
> aspects of our ideological formation. When a part of our worldview
> threatens disruption by manifestly failing to cohere with the rest, then
> we reorganize and retell its story, trying to get it into shape—back
> into the old shape if we are conservative-minded, or into a new
> shape if we are more adventurous. These I call 'faultline' stories.
> They address the awkward, unresolved issues; they require most
> assiduous and continuous reworking; they hinge upon a fundamental,
> unresolved ideological complication that finds its way, willy-nilly, into
> texts. Through diverse literary genres and institutions, people write
> about faultlines, in order to address aspects of their life that they
> find hard to handle.[17]

Though Sinfield appears here to limit himself to literature, what
he has to say applies just as much to last night's TV news or last
weekend's football match as it does to Shakespeare and the rest
of the canon of classical and contemporary writing. (In fact,
Sinfield traverses a wide cultural field in his own work.)

When a fabulous monster speaks, therefore, it does so in
several voices, but not all of these may be heard or sanctioned
or singled out for attention; nor are all these voices necessarily
in harmony with one another. Where men and masculinity are
concerned, issues of fabulousness and monstrosity may be partic-
ularly emphasised in a patriarchal culture's many texts—men and
their behaviours may be characterised as heroic or villainous,
constructive or destructive, supportive or annihilating, and so on.
Yet these multiple facets are also involved in the cultural enterprise
of presenting an ideologically unitary model of the masculine,
which I have elsewhere called the dominant model of masculin-
ity,[18] and which Robert Connell calls hegemonic masculinity.[19]
However, the mere fact that there is cultural pressure to force
notions of masculinity into neat representational configurations
suggests, first, that actualisations of the masculine tend to stray,
refusing to recognise such borders; and, second, that this is the
cause of some considerable anxiety in the culture. This seems

especially so now that one of the effects of the feminist critique of masculinity has been to re-characterise certain traditionally admired traits among men as reprehensible in some way. Thus, for instance, stoicism has been redefined as emotional blankness or illiteracy; the engagement in the public world (as a worker, say), once viewed as the sphere most appropriate to men and which enabled men to measure themselves against one another as go-getters, pillars of the community and so on, has been seen rather as a flight from personal, emotional commitment, an abdication from the responsibilities of child rearing and education, and the gravitation to an 'all boys' society, which is both exclusive of women and committed to destructive games of power and one-upmanship.