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Author(s): Richard Strier

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## **Identity and Power in Tudor England: Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare***

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**Richard Strier**

Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980) is the most provocative study of sixteenth-century English literature since C. S. Lewis's perverse and splendid volume in the Oxford History (1954). Greenblatt's book both does and does not bear comparison with Lewis's, and his relation to his great forebear is not entirely a comfortable one. Greenblatt's is also the most richly contextualized study of sixteenth-century English literature since G. K. Hunter's *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (1962). The way in which Greenblatt contextualizes his writers is the key to the importance of his work. Although *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* is filled with fine and often finely expressed perceptions about individual works, it is not a book of readings. There is little line-by-line or scene-by-scene explication. Each chapter, rather, is a brilliant sally into what Greenblatt calls the poetics of a culture. The great achievement of Greenblatt's book is to locate the figures and works he discusses in a world of social practices.

The dominant figures behind Greenblatt's approach are Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault. He follows Geertz in taking "the

chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force, in whatever form, in result of whatever skill it may come" as "*how to place it* within the other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life" ("Art as a Cultural System," *MLN*, 91 [1976], 1475 [emphasis added]). He follows Foucault in seeing cultural practices in relation to or as expressions of *power*, although, as in Foucault, this central term is not subjected to much scrutiny (see Ian Hacking in *The New York Review of Books* [May 14, 1981], 32-37). And he follows both Geertz and Foucault in seeing cultures as deeply unified wholes. The result of all this is to see the creation of works of art as a social practice (and, to a certain extent, to see social practices as art), and to see works of art as both reflections of and reflections on social practices. This duality is important to Greenblatt, since he wants to avoid the crudities of (vulgar) Marxist "reflection theory," and to work in terms of analogy and parallel manifestation rather than in terms of social or economical causation. Greenblatt's avoidance of crudity has many rewards, but it does tend to leave the question of causality problematic. He never directly confronts the matter of whether or not economic developments are the ultimate determinants of cultural forms. His comments on the crude Marxism of Christopher Caudwell are remarkably equivocal (chapter 3, n. 72; pp. 282-83).

Greenblatt takes the sixteenth century as the focus for his explorations into the creation and representation of selves because he sees the sixteenth century as the first period in England in which there was a large-scale sense of human identity as open to both social and individual shaping, or to use the term which Greenblatt sees as representing the period's own awareness, to "fashioning." Greenblatt fully acknowledges his debt to Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, with its perception of both the state and the individual in fifteenth-century Italy being conceived as products or objects of art, so that the focus on sixteenth-century England does not, for the most part, seem parochial or troubling. Where Greenblatt differs from Burckhardt is in his sense of how powerfully a culture specifies and limits the models of selfhood available to an individual within it. Apparently, according to the Epilogue, Greenblatt began with a Burckhardian sense of "the role of human autonomy in the creation of identity in the period," but came to be more and more aware of the social determinants of individual choices and options.

Greenblatt's book is divided into six chapters which he sees as presenting two triads. The first triad, chapters 1-3, treats Thomas More, William Tyndale (with some other early English Protestants), and Thomas Wyatt. This triad focuses on the ways in which these figures presented and represented *their own* identities in their lives and works. The second triad, chapters 4-6, treats Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, and shifts from the cultural determinants and significance of self-representation to the cultural determinants and significance of ways in which literary characters are represented. Greenblatt thinks of the triads as each presenting two figures who are radically antithetical and a third in whom the opposition is "reiterated

and transformed" but not dialectically resolved (p. 8). There is a troubling neatness to this scheme (which Greenblatt acknowledges), and a tendency, in the face of all caveats, for it to turn into a semi-Hegelian dialectic. It also, moreover, places too much of a demand on Wyatt to represent an absorption of the two giant figures of More and Tyndale. Shakespeare can stand in this structural relation to Spenser and Marlowe, but the tensions between More and Tyndale seem at best transposed into a minor key in Wyatt.

This scheme, despite its problems, is nonetheless the most successful of Greenblatt's ways of conceiving of his groupings; it does generate some powerful insights. The other schemes Greenblatt suggests—in terms, for instance, of the directions "enacted by [his] figures in relation to power"—tend to seem Procrustean and only fitfully apt. The attempt at seeing all his figures as sharing or manifesting "a profound mobility" (p. 7) is rather thin. More significant, however, for the nature of his book is the relative weakness of Greenblatt's attempts to relate his two triads to each other. Greenblatt never fleshes out the claim that "the issues raised at the theological level in the works of More and Tyndale are recapitulated at the secular level in the works of Spenser and Marlow" (p. 8), and the shift from major historical and literary figures of the first third of the century to selected literary works of the last third is never rendered powerfully intelligible. The sense of arbitrariness in the selection of figures and works from the end of the century (why not treat Lyly and Sidney, for instance, and why *Othello* as the only Shakespeare play?) together with the refusal to treat any figures or works not of the first rank (and therefore no mid-century work or figure, no Jewel, or Ascham or Gascoigne) makes Greenblatt's book not fully comparable to Lewis's. And, more internally, Greenblatt never makes clear the way in which the existence of works of the sort represented in the second triad "*depends upon* the lived experience of a self-fashioning culture" (p. 161) of the sort manifested in the figures of the first. Greenblatt explains what he means by "a self-fashioning culture" by discussing rhetoric and courtliness (pp. 161-69), but he never gives any real content to the notion of "*depends upon*." And again, the question of causality goes begging.

Greenblatt's book, then, is not truly a history. Rather, it is a series of linked and often mutually illuminating essays. The impact of the book comes less from the interconnections of the chapters than from their individual suggestiveness within the general endeavor at a cultural poetics. The power of the book is generated by the juxtapositions of literary texts to *non-literary* realities rather than to each other. Only a look at the actual material of the chapters will reveal their haunting and sometimes startling arguments and insights.

The first chapter, "At the Table of the Great: More's Self-Fashioning and Self-Cancellation," is the longest and in many ways the most ambitious in the book. It attempts to see an extremely multifaceted life and oeuvre in terms of a single dynamic between self-presentation as conscious fiction-making and the desire to escape from both self and fiction. One can already, just with the formulation

of the thesis, feel the power of Greenblatt's framework—one's mind begins racing to try to apply it. There is no doubt that this thesis captures something essential in More, that is, his sense of the theatrical dimension of public life. Greenblatt, however, both metaphysicalizes this perception and sharpens it into a hopeless paradox. Where More says that it is dangerous for poor men to take part in the "stage plays" of princes because "*when they cannot play their parts, they disorder the play and do themselves no good,*" Greenblatt asserts that what is dangerous is the playing itself, not the making of a mistake (p. 14; emphasis added). This may seem to be a small difference, but it points to the tendency toward melodrama and premature totalizing that lends an air of rhetorical exaggeration to a good deal of Greenblatt's writing.

Greenblatt is better on the social than the metaphysical plane. He does not provide any real evidence for More's "haunting perception of universal madness" (p. 16) as opposed to his sense of theatricality, which is well documented. He makes excellent use of More's epigram "On the King and the Peasant," but his metaphysical comment on it—"all men are caught up in receding layers of fantasy"—is far less trenchant than his political comment on More's simultaneous radicalism and conservatism (p. 27). The long discussion of Holbein's "The Ambassadors," while fascinating in itself, does not yield much insight into More (*Utopia* seems a less "anamorphic" work than, say, *The Praise of Folly*), but the move from discussing art and texts to discussing actual instances of royal display in Henry VIII's court is brilliantly successful (pp. 28-29). The tendency toward melodrama and metaphysicalizing also eliminates much sense of More as a humanist politician with specific reforming goals, and also much sense of More's *enjoyment* of role-playing, though both of these things are glancingly acknowledged.

The centerpiece of Greenblatt's discussion of More is, naturally, his analysis of *Utopia*. By far the best and most convincing part of this analysis derives from Greenblatt's anthropological awareness and orientation, his identification of Utopia as overwhelmingly a shame rather than a guilt culture. He is certainly correct that "Utopia is constructed so that one is always under observation" (p. 49), and in seeing Utopian beliefs about the dead as amounting to "belief in a constant, invisible surveillance" (p. 50). Where I find myself dissenting from Greenblatt is when he tries to turn the screw of this insight yet tighter by psychologizing it in relation to More and seeing More's imaginative creation of a shame-culture as a dream of retreat from his own sense of guilt (pp. 51-52). The dynamics of Greenblatt's own framework of self-construction and self-cancellation lead him to see Utopia as primarily "a society designed to reduce the scope of the inner life" (p. 53). Greenblatt is here attributing his own framework to More. He virtually acknowledges this displacement in an earlier passage when he states, quite correctly and with a pregnant comparison to early Marx, that More "propounds communism less as a coherent economic program than as a weapon against certain tendencies in human nature," and then details these tendencies as "pride, to

be sure, but also that complex, self-conscious, theatrical accommodation to the world which we recognize as the characteristic mode of modern individuality." *Utopia* becomes, therefore, "not only a brilliant attack on the social and economic injustices of early sixteenth-century England but a work of profound self-criticism" (p. 37). These "to be sure's" and "not only's" signal Greenblatt's awareness of the difference between More's terms and his own.

The result of this substitution of terms is that the (supposed) elimination of the citizens' inner lives becomes the focus of Greenblatt's discussion of *Utopia*. This leads him both to under-emphasize the place of intellectual life in Utopia, and to present Utopian society as more austere than it is. In order to argue that pleasure, for the Utopians, is a rather abstract and external thing, Greenblatt must ignore the Utopian love of desserts and make the society sound more negative toward sexuality than it actually is. He quotes the beginning of a paragraph derived from Plato's *Gorgias* criticizing a life devoted to bodily pleasures (p. 43), but ignores the end of the paragraph which explains that the Utopians "enjoy even these pleasures and *gratefully acknowledge the kindness of mother nature*" in providing them (Yale paperback ed., p. 101; emphasis added). He sees Utopian religious tolerance as springing from indifference to the inner (p. 53) rather than, as More says, *from principle* (Yale paper, p. 133), while his comparison of Utopian punishment of impiety with the procedures of the Inquisition (p. 56) downplays (by relegating to a footnote) the fact that what the Utopians mean by "impiety" is flagrantly immoral *behavior*, not unorthodox *beliefs*.

What Greenblatt's discussion of *Utopia* does show is More's extraordinary insistence on communal *institutions*. This seems to establish a genuine connection between the reformer and the persecutor. To return momentarily to the Greenblatt-Lewis comparison, Greenblatt's treatment of More is not only better on *Utopia* but also in its sense of the tragedy of More's development into a heretic-hunter. Lewis is too ready to impute to More "a gradual and honorable change very like that which overtook Burke and Wordsworth" (*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 170). Greenblatt argues that More was attacking a part of himself, previously dramatized as Hythlodæus, in his vicious portraits of Luther and Tyndale (pp. 58ff.). The marginal note comparing Luther's invisible church to Utopia in the *Responsio Ad Lutherum* is truly as melancholy as Greenblatt suggests (p. 59). Again, however, Greenblatt perhaps makes the schematism too sharp. The extraordinary violence of More's hatred ("truly the shit-pool of all shit," etc.) needs more careful and extended examination. Greenblatt's final comments on the way in which "Morus" and Hythlodæus from Book I of *Utopia* are finally reunited in More's Tower Works are suggestive, though here too the equation of More's actual public self with the rather grubbily accommodationist Morus is perhaps a bit too neat.

As his emphasis on theatricality would imply, Greenblatt has an acute eye for public gestures. In chapter two, illustrating the way in which early Protestants "seem to have experienced the inquisitorial

process as a kind of theatre" (p. 77), Greenblatt singles out and comments excellently upon "a brilliant piece of histrionic improvisation" recorded in Foxe's account of Sir John Oldcastle, the Lollard martyr (p. 78). In the episode from Foxe that is his major focus, however, James Bainham's examination for heresy, recantation, recantation of his recantation, and execution, Greenblatt's tendency toward rhetorical exaggeration creates some real distortions. He speaks repeatedly of the sense of "compulsion" in Bainham's post-recantation behavior, and appeals to Freudian "undoing" and to ideas of pollution and ritual expiation (pp. 83-84). In a note, he rightly criticizes a reductive recent psycho-historical study of Tudor martyrs (p. 270, n. 25; and see p. 84), but his own approach seems dangerously close to the one he is attacking. He means to invoke "undoing" as an analogue rather than an explanation—thereby leaving its exact status unclear—but the question is why invoke it at all?

Melodramatic language pervades this chapter. We hear of the early Protestant "fetishism of Scripture" (p. 94) and testimonial to "the magical power of the Word" (p. 97). These are unfair and misleading phrases created mainly by Greenblatt's love of paradox—the iconoclasts as fetishists, etc. Most of all in this chapter, we hear of Tyndale's "rage against authority" and "hatred of the father" (p. 85), his "violent obedience" (pp. 89-90 and *passim*). These paradoxes about Tyndale are generated by Greenblatt. He acknowledges the coherence between Tyndale's theory of obedience and his theory of disobedience, but insists that these theories exist in uneasy tension (p. 92). Part of the problem here is created by Greenblatt's compulsion (?) to disagree with Lewis. He acknowledges that Lewis is right, in context, to speak of "the beautiful, cheerful integration of Tyndale's world" (Lewis, p. 190; Greenblatt, p. 112), but he cannot allow this sense of integration to stand.

Greenblatt's discussion of Tyndale entirely lacks Lewis's attempt to capture the psychological impact of the doctrine of justification by faith. What Greenblatt does succeed in evoking is a sense of the psychological and cultural impact of the printed vernacular New Testament and of early Protestant printed books generally. Here, his paradoxical use of Benjamin in his chapter title, "The Word of God in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," is genuinely productive. Greenblatt's argument is that the fact that printed books did not have *aura* (Benjamin's term) in the way manuscripts did does not mean that they lacked "a special kind of presence" (pp. 86, 95-99). It is not an original point but it bears repetition. Greenblatt perhaps pushes too hard on the possible ambiguity between the book and the inner state in Foxe's description of Bainham having "the Obedience of a Christian Man in his bosom" (p. 84; on p. 87, Greenblatt assumes, probably rightly, that it is the book), but he is certainly correct in linking the early Protestant experience of the Book to Bunyan's over a century later (p. 98). There is, however, a missing term in this discussion. Greenblatt tends to speak directly of the English New Testament as a "form of power" rather than of the new experience of conscience through which "its" power was exercised. This experience of con-

science cries out for discussion, as does the relation between the strong sense of individual integrity and the equally strong sense of communal identification of the early Protestants (and later Puritans).

Some of the large generalizations in this second chapter reveal the strengths and the weaknesses of Greenblatt's book. The problematic nature of his relation to economic interpretation is dramatized by a sentence in which, after a huge and virtually undocumented generalization about men experiencing a great "unmooring" at the beginning of the sixteenth century, he asserts that "the complex sources of this anxiety *may be rooted* in momentous changes in the material world...[in] the realignment of European-wide economic forces" (p. 88; emphasis added). I cannot tell here whether Greenblatt is making this assertion or speculating about it. More troubling is the later remark that in the early sixteenth century, "It is as if the great crisis of the Church had forced into the consciousness of Catholics and Protestants alike the wrenching possibility that their theological system was a fictional construction; that the whole vast edifice of church and state rested on certain imaginary postulates" (p. 113). The problem here is not merely that it is difficult to decide whether Greenblatt is making an assertion or not, but that he has purposely created the difficulty. The "it is as if" construction allows him both to make and not to make the assertion. There is something approaching bad faith here. Greenblatt will not let his awareness of the implausibility of the claim keep him from making it. His assimilation of Tyndale's "God is not man's imagination" to his argument forces him to begin the next sentence with a "To be sure" acknowledging that Tyndale is *not* doing what he suggests. On the other hand, some of Greenblatt's final generalizations about the deep connections between More and Tyndale with regard to their shared desire for "a means to absorb the ambiguities of identity... into a larger redeeming certainty" are as just as they are striking.

Greenblatt's chapter on Wyatt includes some of his most successful attempts at cultural contextualization. If speaking of "the two irascible aristocrats," Wyatt's God and his king (Henry VIII) seems overly breezy, the connection between the world of Renaissance diplomacy and that of Wyatt's love poetry is completely convincing. Greenblatt's use of material from Mattingly's *Renaissance Diplomacy* is excellent, as is his analysis of an actual piece of diplomacy by Wyatt (pp. 142ff.). Louis Dumont's comment on "pre-economic" ideas about exchange (p. 141) is also strikingly apropos. The allusions to Mattingly and Dumont in this chapter have a precision and a power lacking in the strained and fleeting references to Habermas (p. 130) and Merleau-Ponty (p. 123). Greenblatt's evocation of the quality of social interactions at the court of Henry VIII allows him to reject the trivializing contextualization of H. A. Mason's picture of Wyatt "merely supplying material for social occasions" to recover the sense of resentment in Wyatt's lyrics that C. S. Lewis, as Greenblatt puts it, "so acutely voices only to disavow" (p. 138).

Greenblatt attempts to coordinate Wyatt's three major bodies of poetry: the penitential psalms, the satires, and the lyrics. The



psalms and the lyrics are coordinated in a rather general way as “helping to create the subjectivity they express” (p. 139) and as focusing on the relations between sexuality and power. The satires and the lyrics are easily and successfully coordinated through their evocation of the milieu of the court, but the satires and the psalms are coordinated in a rather complex and unstable way. Greenblatt sees the psalms and satires as representing distinct and competing modes of self-fashioning, through submission (the psalms) and through negation (the satires). This is an interesting suggestion, but it is complicated by Greenblatt’s somewhat grudging acknowledgment that “though distinct, submission and negation are not necessarily incompatible” (p. 128). The relation between the two modes remains obscure, and what is missing from the entire discussion is much sense of the *continuities* in Wyatt’s self-presentation throughout. Greenblatt never fully focuses on the desire to escape from mutability that connects the three bodies of poetry or on Wyatt’s pervasive sense of the self as something acted upon and reacting (in speech) rather than as acting upon the world.

Greenblatt does not want to acknowledge an achieved selfhood in the satires. His account of “the coldness that lurks beneath the surface energy” of the satires (p. 132) is mere rhetorical assertion. His denial of a stable norm in “A Spending Hand” depends upon totalizing the vision of the pursuit of wealth in the poem into “the rules of the game” (p. 134) so that the very possibility of a non-money-grubbing courtier (like Wyatt himself) disappears. The argument also depends upon a completely speculative and non-contextual identification of Wyatt’s with Thomas Cromwell’s view of Francis Brian, the addressee of the poem. More important than any particular distortions, however, is the lack of focus on the remarkable passivity of the self presented in Wyatt’s poetry. Greenblatt excellently remarks on the speaker’s “perfect passivity” in the epiphanic second stanza of “They flee from me” (p. 151), but he loses the force of this perception by seeing the first stanza in terms of (male) sexual aggression. Wyatt, however, presents the speaker virtually as passive there as in his ecstasy. The poem seems to be about the false renunciation rather than about the false exercise of power. Wyatt’s special passive aggressiveness and sense of the self as a contained entity not part of any communal body slip through Greenblatt’s mesh, although just barely.

Greenblatt’s chapter on the destruction of the Bower of Bliss in Book Two of *The Faerie Queene* is marred only by tendentiousness toward Lewis; otherwise it is wholly successful. Greenblatt rightly affirms the erotic appeal of the Bower, but is wrong to suggest that it *depicts* erotic activity (as opposed to langor). To distinguish the sexuality Spenser sanctions from that of the Bower as “between a pleasure that serves some useful purpose...and a pleasure that does not” (p. 67) is to extend Lewis’s argument in *The Allegory of Love* not to refute it.

The real focus of Greenblatt’s chapter, however, is not the individual-psychological dimension of the destruction of the Bower

but the status of this episode as a kind of cultural emblem. For Greenblatt, the central meaning of the episode resides in the extraordinary and extraordinarily thoroughgoing violence with which the beguiling Bower is destroyed. Gyon "with rigour pitiless... of the fairest late, now made the fowlest place" (FQ 2.12.83). Greenblatt's focus on the dialectic between seductiveness and righteously ruthless violence allows him to see the destruction of the Bower paralleled in three historical activities of Renaissance culture: the European response to the native cultures of the New World; the English colonial struggle in Ireland; and the Reformation attack on images (p. 179). This is brilliant indeed and has only to be said to be believed. It leaves one wondering, in Dr. Johnson's terms, not how such connections could have been made but rather how they ever could have been missed. And, especially in the cases of the first two analogues, Greenblatt is able to fill in the details. He uses the voyagers' accounts to great effect in showing the threat to European identity the native cultures were seen as posing, and he uses Spenser's own *View of the Present State of Ireland* to show the way in which Spenser's surprising sense of the seductiveness of native Irish culture led to his conviction that the English did not have merely to conquer Ireland militarily but *to annihilate its culture* (pp. 185-89). The argument for equating the destruction of the Bower with iconoclasm is intricate and a bit rushed, but equally convincing.

The chapter on Marlowe begins with another arresting account of European destructiveness taken from a voyage narrative. As Greenblatt says, the violence in this account is strikingly casual and unexplained (p. 194). This would seem an excellent transition to Marlowe, especially to *Tamburlaine*. Greenblatt hints at the relevance of the fact that the author of the quoted account is a merchant, and suggests that the true analogue to Tamburlaine's restlessness, aesthetic sensibility, and violence is not "the relentless power-hunger of Tudor absolutism" but "the acquisitive energies of English merchants." Oddly enough, however, this chapter lacks further historical specification. A good literal connection is made between Tamburlaine's destructiveness and the opening anecdote (p. 198), but the discussion of *Tamburlaine* takes on a metaphysical cast through a strained connection of Marlowe's sense of theatrical space to Cassirer's discussion of relativized spatial terms in Renaissance philosophy, and through a section on "transcendental homelessness" that sounds uncomfortably like the thin Romantic existentialism of Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*.

The chapter lacks focus and overall design. The discussion of *The Jew of Malta* returns to a social matrix, using Marx's *On the Jewish Question* as an analogue to the treatment of Barabas's Jewishness in Marlowe's play. This comparison works almost too well. Marlowe really does seem to have many of the same insights as Marx, so that the comparison does not seem to reveal anything strikingly new. The best result is to enable Greenblatt to see Marlowe doing ideological criticism in *The Jew*, "reflecting upon his culture's bad faith, its insistence on the otherness of what is in fact its essence"

(p. 209). Yet Greenblatt is reluctant to grant Marlowe a genuinely radical viewpoint. He sees Marlowe as not only revealing the profound (and psychologically necessary) bad faith of his society but also as demonstrating “the tragic limitations of rebellion against this culture.” This is true of *Faustus* but not of *The Jew*, where Barabas is not rebelling, and, most of all, not of *Tamburlaine*. Greenblatt is good on the importance of *Tamburlaine* not being a *de casibus* tragedy (p. 202), but his acknowledgment that Tamburlaine “comes close to defining himself in opposition to the order against which he wars” dissolves in the subsequent observation that even here “the movement toward a truly radical alternative is thwarted by the orthodoxy against which it struggles” (pp. 210-11). Greenblatt’s arguments against the consistency and coherence of Marlowe’s materialism seem more thwarted by orthodoxy than does Marlowe himself. The central theme of *Tamburlaine*, the celebration of power conceived as power over the bodies of others—what Simone Weil called “force”—is never directly confronted.

The question of power, conceived in psychic rather than somatic terms, is confronted in the final chapter of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, the essay on *Othello*. This chapter makes the book’s most startling connection between a literary and a social phenomenon in elaborating its most profound and haunting piece of *Ideologiekritik*. Greenblatt quotes a contemporary sociologist celebrating the “mobile sensibility” of the modern Western individual as the quality of *empathy*, and eulogizing as well the development of this sensibility through physical mobility in the Age of Exploration and the diffusion of this sensibility through the contemporary mass media (pp. 224-25). Greenblatt is able to reveal the sinister and exploitative side of this quality of adaptability by showing the role it actually played in the conquest of the New World (which emerges, in Greenblatt’s book, as the central event of late Renaissance “self-fashioning”). His example is a story from Peter Martyr about the way in which certain Spanish explorers inserted themselves into the mythological and ritual worlds of the Bahaman natives as a means of exercising power without having to resort to violence. What Lerner, the sociologist, calls *empathy*, Greenblatt calls *improvisation*, and he sees the central literary representation of this mode (now thought of as behavioral as well as psychic) in the figure of Iago. Greenblatt convincingly argues that despite Iago’s subordinate official position, his relationship to Othello is nonetheless colonial.

These are insights of enormous importance. They not only sharpen one’s perception of *Othello* but alter one’s sense of the whole configuration of Renaissance and modern Western society. They truly function as a *cultural* poetics. I am not, however, as fully convinced by some of the specific ways in which Greenblatt relates *Othello* to its cultural context as I am by the general relation just sketched. There is some historical confusion in the details of Greenblatt’s analysis. He seems to me correct in seeing Iago as “emphatically” building upon Othello’s “buried perception of his own sexual relations with Desdemona as adulterous” (p. 233). The problem is with Greenblatt’s

use of this insight. He sees Othello's buried view as that basic to Christianity; ultimately, therefore, Othello is undone by something normative in his culture. This argument, however, takes the rigorist patristic and medieval view as normative for Christianity and glosses over the psychological (and social) implications of the Reformation exaltation of marriage. Greenblatt acknowledges this celebration, but does not let it affect his generalizations about Christianity or his use of antinomianism as the opposite of rigor (p. 278). He uses Roland Frye's "The Teaching of Classical Puritanism on Conjugal Love" for some material on jealousy, but not on allowed passion between husband and wife—Frye's major point. The Puritans Frye quotes did *not* think that ardent sexual love of one's spouse was adulterous. This makes a difference. The theologically sensitive in Shakespeare's overwhelmingly Protestant audience might have seen Othello as partly a study of the way in which Roman Catholic religion needlessly burdened and destabilized the conscience.

Nevertheless, even if Greenblatt's specific contextualization of his insights is slightly askew, his discussion of *Othello* stands with Stanley Cavell's and Arthur Kirsch's as among the most interesting recent treatments of the play. The analogy Greenblatt draws between Guyon's and Othello's transformation of "complicity in erotic excess" into a "'purifying,' saving violence" (p. 250) is electrifying, as is his analysis (p. 252) of Othello's necrophilic fantasy ("I will kill thee, / And love thee after"). To fulfill the promise of his endeavor, however, and to build on his major insights into the cultural role of improvisation, Greenblatt must attempt to identify the place of Shakespeare within Elizabethan-Jacobean culture. Shakespeare must bear the burden of having been "the presiding genius of a popular, urban art form with the capacity to foster psychic mobility in the service of Elizabethan power" (p. 253). Greenblatt, however, rightly shrinks from presenting Shakespeare as merely implicated in his culture. He wants to recognize as well the *critical* dimension of Shakespeare's plays. In a sense, it is a pity that Greenblatt had already used Althusser's conception of "internal distantiating" from an ideology in relation to Wyatt, since it might have borne much greater fruit here. Instead, Greenblatt relies on a paradox about the unsettling effect of intense submission modeled on his view of Desdemona. One senses strain here, a punch being pulled, as Greenblatt retreats into metaphor. A more discursive account would have helped. The idea of Shakespeare *exploring* the relations of power in his culture might have been successfully developed. Greenblatt's own framework suggests the potentially unsettling effect of a writer seeing *all* the values of his culture as theatricalizable, as representable. There is no "outside," no freedom from roles and fictions.

As this last observation shows, one is likely to disagree with Greenblatt by building on or modifying terms which he himself has suggested. The level of intelligence at work in this book is extraordinarily high, the range of reference extraordinarily wide and interesting, the ideal of a "cultural poetics" adumbrated and at times brilliantly manifested tremendously compelling. Certainly more work

along these lines, for the Renaissance and for other periods, needs to be done. Reading this book can lead to a newly reflective and properly uneasy sense of the ways in which literature and the psychic structures it represents and engenders can be implicated in the forms which power and domination take in a culture. Although the Epilogue to the book ends on a surprising moment of Romantic humanism, the body of the book leaves one thinking not about one's freedom, or even the illusion of it, but about the location of both selves and the representations of them in cultures with limited and well-defined norms. Ultimately, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* points away from selves. It is a book which no one concerned with Western culture in or since the Renaissance should miss.\*

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The University of Chicago