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Author(s): Jan R. Veenstra

Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Oct., 1995), pp. 174-198

Published by: Wiley for Wesleyan University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2505620>

Accessed: 30-03-2020 14:56 UTC

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THE NEW HISTORICISM OF STEPHEN GREENBLATT:  
ON POETICS OF CULTURE AND THE INTERPRETATION  
OF SHAKESPEARE

JAN R. VEENSTRA

ABSTRACT

This essay on the much acclaimed critic Stephen Greenblatt deals extensively with the New Historicism he developed and for which he coined the name "Poetics of Culture." Contrary to many older interpretive methods and schools that tend to see historical and literary texts as autonomous entities, Poetics of Culture seeks to reveal the relationship between texts and their sociohistorical contexts. Cultural Poetics assumes that texts not only document the social forces that inform and constitute history and society but also feature prominently in the social processes themselves which fashion both individual identity and the sociohistorical situation. By means of an economic metaphor, Greenblatt explains how texts and other symbolic goods, by circulating in a society via channels of negotiation and exchange, contribute to the distribution of social energy, by which he means the intensities of experience that give value and meaning to life and that are also indispensable to the construction of self-awareness and identity. The beating heart, as it were, of this whole process of circulation is identified as a dialectics of totalization and differentiation, as a powerful social force that oscillates between the extremes of sameness and otherness. In several books Greenblatt has elaborated the various aspects of this Poetics of Culture, such as the circulation of social energy, the dialectics of totalization and differentiation, and the process of self-fashioning. This essay discusses some problems of this interpretive method and argues, in comparing it to a more traditional hermeneutics, that social energy, self-fashioning, and the earlier mentioned dialectic are only phenomena in Greenblatt's interpretation of texts and are not actual parts of sociohistorical contexts. Poetics of Culture, in spite of its radical claims, is a genuine hermeneutics operating in a more or less traditional vein.

Stephen Greenblatt is beyond doubt one of the most notable critics in the field of literary and historical studies known as New Historicism. This critical movement purports to present an entirely new way of reading and interpreting texts. Its claims to novelty have, of course, been contradicted and it is not my purpose either to prove or disprove the originality of New Historicist readings. Instead, this essay will survey Greenblatt's ideas on the nature of the text and will focus on his interpretive practice as a hermeneutics. Not its innovative zeal, but its capacity to produce profound and illuminating readings will validate a new method of interpretation, and Greenblatt's ideas and readings are both provocative and rewarding.

## I. NEW HISTORICISM AND POETICS OF CULTURE

“I am Richard II. Know ye not that?” Queen Elizabeth I exclaimed on August 4, 1601.<sup>1</sup> This remarkable temporary confusion of royal identity was occasioned by the restaging of one of Shakespeare’s royal dramas, the public performance of which had been intended to kindle certain rebellious appetites in the hearts of the populace. In the wake of the abortive Essex uprising, the image of Richard slain and his throne usurped by Henry Bolingbroke represented real political danger and a serious threat to the life of the Queen. “This tragedy was played 40tie times in open streets and houses,” the Queen added to leave no shadow of a doubt that the motivation behind these performances was to make her a “dish fit for the gods.”

In view of the general critical reception of the play the queen’s interpretation of *Richard II*, however, is quite unusual. A critical reading of the play, one feels, only reinforces the idea that the duke of Hereford, the later Henry IV, is a rebel, a usurper, and a regicide profaning the sanctity of the throne. At best, one imagines, the restaging of the play might have signalled a warning to the audience that some foul insurrection was at hand. This, however, appears to be neither the motive behind the play’s restaging, which was sanctioned by the revolutionaries,<sup>2</sup> nor the interpretation that the queen gave to it. It appears that the radically changed conditions under which the play was addressed to the audience was accompanied by an equally radical displacement of meaning. And the relation between the conditions and the displacement appears to be a causal one.

This brief instance of the subversive power of the stage in the Elizabethan era is mentioned by the renowned critic Stephen Greenblatt in one of his articles<sup>3</sup> as an illustration of the fact that meaning is not some innate center of a text. Beyond the conventional limits of the theater, the very practice of the performance “in open streets and houses” is, in the above example, a stronger factor in the production of meaning than the general critical reception. The queen’s identification with Richard II betrays a keen awareness of the audience’s capacity to actively produce new meanings and, for Greenblatt, it not only marks a fundamental lack of confidence in a general critical readership, but rather undermines the very notion of such a thing as general reception and exposes as a myth its objective of a right reading.

These ideas go very much against the grain of the historical and literary criticism that dominated, roughly speaking, the first half of this century. Various and differing ideas can be detected in this motley array of critical opinion that seems to have wavered between the extremes of textual autonomy on the literary side and of textual translucency on the historical side. Historical criticism was

1. See Stephen Greenblatt, “Introduction” to *The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance*, *Genre* 15 (1982), 3–6.

2. Cf. J. B. Black, *The Reign of Elizabeth 1558–1603*, *The Oxford History of England* (Oxford, 1959), VIII, 438–439.

3. Greenblatt, *The Forms of Power*.

characterized by the rather naive conception of a text as something transparent, providing an immediate grasp of the reality to which the words referred. The retrieval of meaning was a process unhampered by this shiny window on the world and untainted by the interpretive labors of the reader. The window has now become opaque and the interpretive labors are known to be exceedingly creative in their fabrication of meaning. Historians have therefore shifted their attention from the problem of historical knowledge to the problem of historical writing, as Lionel Gossman has pointed out.<sup>4</sup> Literary criticism as it was practiced by formalists, New Critics, and many others regarded the text as an autonomous entity. Their criticism attempted to be objective in that it aimed at articulating the meaning and the literariness of a text in terms of its intrinsic language-system. Their scrupulous principles of analysis carefully warded off all links with the exterior environment, which, in effect, became a forbidden world of authors, readers, and social circumstance.

Critical opinion has changed dramatically since the days of formalist reverie,<sup>5</sup> but the beaten track of one's forebears is all too often, if not always, the proper point of departure for new explorations. As an interpreter and a close reader of texts Greenblatt shows some of the scrutiny of the finest of the New Critics and some of his theoretical assertions directly challenge New Critical doctrines. The strict severance of the text from its sociohistorical context is severely criticized by Greenblatt, not in an attempt to ban the distinction but in an attempt to show that the relations between textual and other forms of social production are more complex than is dreamt of in formalist philosophies. And perhaps T. S. Eliot's famous dictum that a poem should be regarded as poetry and not as something else reverberates at the background of the phrase with which Greenblatt labeled his hermeneutical enterprise: "Poetics of Culture." A poem should undoubtedly be regarded as poetry, but regarding it as nothing but poetry is to turn a blind eye to what are, according to Greenblatt, probably its most important aspects, namely the ways in which the poem is informed by the sociohistorical context, the ways in which it acquires its meaning. In fact, taking the argument a bit further, regarding a poem as nothing but poetry is not regarding the poem at all. Poetry and history are both forms of *poiesis*, a creative force that pervades all domains of human activity.

In a number of articles and books (especially *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, and *Marvelous Possessions*<sup>6</sup>) Greenblatt puts this "Poetics of Culture" into practice. From these works it becomes clear that he is not so much interested in referential realities on the one hand and literary and historical writing on the other as in the relationship between these two. A text is in fact a closely-knit fabric composed of both threads. Greenblatt's views

4. Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 230.

5. A book like Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* (Chicago, 1980) gives a useful survey.

6. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980); *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford, 1988); and *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford, 1991).

on the nature of textuality, one feels, are probably central to his "Poetics of Culture," the hermeneutical practice that, in a moment of inadvertence, he called "New Historicism," an "advertising phrase"<sup>7</sup> that, having caught on, became the banner of an entire critical movement. Greenblatt, resigning himself to the popular support for the label, has labored ever since not so much to theorize about its contents as to demonstrate these contents in the actual practice of interpreting texts. Whether this practice should be labelled "Poetics of Culture" or "New Historicism" is a matter of taste, and though general usage seems to have decided the matter in favor of the latter, the former more concisely sums up the objectives of Greenblattian hermeneutics.

In this essay I propose to concentrate on Greenblatt's views on the nature of textuality and on the ways in which texts acquire meaning. Texts constitute very important and sometimes the only sources for historical and literary research. Our views and presuppositions regarding the nature of a given text, or of textuality in general, will inevitably influence and condition the results of our research. Greenblatt has made an important and eloquent contribution to this discussion on the nature of the text and his work merits a close examination in the light of this topic. In what follows I propose to discuss some of Greenblatt's theoretical insights, comparing them occasionally with the ideas of other authors in the field, and also to summarize two instances of Greenblatt's interpretive skills, an unavoidable task since the New Historicism, it is urged, is not a doctrine but a practice.

## II. TEXT AND SOCIETY

What is a text? If we take this question as already presupposing a definition of a text as a discrete and isolated object in a universe of objects our answer to the question will not take us very far beyond formalist opinion. A text is much more than a written, linguistic phenomenon. Contrary to most of the objects of many of the sciences, a text is produced by humans, and as a human-made object it is radically informed by all the forces that condition and shape our societies and histories. The first step in discussing Greenblatt's views will therefore be to examine his ideas on the relationship between text and context, between art and society. This question, of course, is an old one, firmly rooted in both Marxist and poststructuralist aesthetic inquiry, as Greenblatt is well aware, when in an article called "Towards a Poetics of Culture," he analyzes the ideas of the Marxist thinker Fredric Jameson and the poststructuralist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard.<sup>8</sup>

Jameson, as a Marxist, Greenblatt explains, attempts to justify a materialist integration of all discourses and to that end seeks to expose the fallaciousness of a separate artistic sphere. The capitalist distinction between poetic and socio-

7. Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture" in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York and London, 1990), 146.

8. *Ibid.*, 146-160.

political texts reinforces the segregation of the private and the public, the psychological and the social. In this process of privatization capitalism is the agent of repressive differentiation. As a poststructuralist, Lyotard, on the other hand, is primarily interested in the differentiation of all discourses. These differentiated discourses are based on the existence of proper names. Capitalism, according to Lyotard, does not reinforce this differentiation (as Jameson argued) but questions it, trying to coin a single language or discourse and a single network. It thereby causes a false integration and a false monological unity. Capitalism is thus the agent of monological totalization.

Greenblatt is ill at ease with these generalizing opinions that, in his view, treat history as an anecdotal ornament and illustration of certain hypotheses. Against Jameson he argues that capitalism, far from reinforcing privatization, rather led to a drastic communalization of all discourse. Against Lyotard, he argues that capitalism strongly contributed to the generation and inscription of individuality; property gave rise to proper names (surnames) that were devised as a means for taxation. What the two theorists fail to realize is that differentiation and monological organization are both the contradictory effects of a capitalist society. Its power does not depend on the assumption of a fixed position, be it difference or totality, but on the oscillation between the two. The “establishment of distinct discursive domains and the collapse of those domains into one another”<sup>9</sup> characterizes capitalist societies from the sixteenth century onwards.

From this analysis, in which Greenblatt emphasizes the oscillation between totalization and differentiation, between uniformity and diversity, it becomes clear that this dialectic which is built into the poetics of everyday behavior in a capitalist society has important consequences for one’s appreciation of textuality. First of all the idea of the text is lifted from its traditional confines by the concept of “discourse” which, ever since Foucault (an important source of inspiration for Greenblatt), denotes the sum total of all thought as social practice. Second, a given text is not only a fragment of an overall discourse; it is also subject to the cultural dialectics that fashion it, and as such is suspended between two extremes.

This can be illustrated by Greenblatt’s book *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. In the introductory chapter<sup>10</sup> he explains how one evening in Bali, during the festivities of the Indonesian Independence Day, he witnessed the remarkable coexistence of the public showing of a rather violent American motion picture and the performance of a traditional Balinese shadow puppet play, the two performances taking place on opposite sides of a densely crowded square. Spectators moved effortlessly from the one to the other, apparently unaware of the cultural gap. This cultural hybridity testified to the cultural assimilation as well as the cultural differentiation; the two extremes which introduce the major themes of the book.

9. *Ibid.*, 153.

10. Greenblatt, “Introduction” to *Marvelous Possessions*, 1–25.

*Marvelous Possessions* deals with narratives of travel, both fictional and historical, in which the author tries to demonstrate the operation of this dialectic of differentiation and assimilation in the meeting between explorers and foreign cultures. He deals extensively with the narratives of Sir John Mandeville (the imaginary fourteenth-century traveler) and Columbus. Their writings are representations of the exotic, and especially Columbus's texts display the initial shock of the encounter with alterity. The explorers describe their amazement and wonder, which marks a strategic point in Western representation, since it is a first step towards enveloping the other in the web of Western discourse, a first step towards appropriation. According to Greenblatt representations are part of the mimetic capital that circulates in a certain society and that actually enables the process of assimilation. In the wake of Carlo Ginzburg,<sup>11</sup> he draws attention to the difference between *petites histoires*, the fragmentary nature of which still bears witness to the shock of the encounter with alterity, and the grand totalizing histories in which all otherness has been incorporated, assimilated, and reduced to sameness. Greenblatt favors the *petites histoires* that bear the marks of the early stages of this process of assimilation, since their authors are wrapped up in amazement and wonder at the sight of new worlds and unknown peoples. The dialectics that Greenblatt presupposes to be operative in such narratives strongly determine his interpretation of Mandeville's *Travels* and Columbus's letters.

In an essay with the resounding title "From the Dome of the Rock to the Rim of the World" he tries to show how Mandeville's *Travels* is marked by an inner tension between a familiar world of well-known and reassuring truths and a different, unknown world of marvels and exotic distortions of reality. The part of the book that deals with a journey through the Holy Land resounds with the echoes of Biblical narrative and the familiar Christian world view. The Holy Land is "the place of sacred metonymy."<sup>12</sup> Metonymy, the factual relationship between a signifier and a signified<sup>13</sup> (a holy place denotes an event from sacred history associated with that place) dissolves into metaphor when Mandeville wanders off into an unknown and all too often imaginary and curiously distorted world. The Christian worldview is still more or less the most important referent of the text, but the relation between signifiers and signifieds is no longer factual but metaphorical and the metaphors exert considerable strain on their referents. A city of idolatry in Tibet replicates as well as opposes the Christian *civitas*. A cannibalistic funeral in which the deceased is not consumed by fire or earth but by the mourners, seems to be a curious metaphorical travesty of the Eucharist. Heterodoxy abounds in Mandeville's *Travels*. This book, once widely read all over Europe, ends up questioning the stable and totalizing worldview that it took as point of departure. Greenblatt sees the

11. Cf. Ginzburg's essay "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm" in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore and London, 1989), 96–125.

12. Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 41.

13. *Ibid.*, 47. The semiotic terms are Greenblatt's.

book as an “undermining of propriety” and as an instance of “extreme dispossession”<sup>14</sup> — an interpretation that is especially reinforced by the fact that the book is not a literary property. Mandeville as a person proved to be entirely fictional and the real author of his *Travels* is unknown.

In Columbus’s accounts of his journeys to the new world<sup>15</sup> Greenblatt tries to demonstrate a similar dialectical tension between the two dominant motives of the famous explorer; his thirst for gold and power and his religious, missionary zeal. Instead of simply rejecting the imperialist policy of the early explorers (who appropriated the new lands and sold the inhabitants as slaves) as something that should not have happened, Greenblatt tries to understand why it did, looking for a rationale behind the mixed and, even according to many of Columbus’s Christian contemporaries, incompatible motives. Greenblatt finds this solution in the Christian paradox that the new self cannot come to life unless the old self dies, or in the words of Donne’s Holy Sonnet: “Take mee to you, imprison me, for I / Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free.”<sup>16</sup> In order to be reborn, the Indians have to become slaves first. Columbus’s actions as well as his discourse are informed by a cultural dialectics, but contrary to Mandeville’s “dispossessive” attitude towards foreign worlds (an easy virtue for an armchair-traveler) Columbus’s discourse bears witness to how the initial shock and wonder of alterity is superseded by the first instances of material appropriation that adumbrate its imminent and more complete integration into the totality of Western discourse.

Greenblatt’s detailed and perceptive analyses emphasize that a text is informed by the same cultural dialectics as society at large. A text reflects as well as supports this dialectics or, to put it differently, a sociohistorical context conditions its textual representations and likewise a text informs and sometimes even conditions the historical process. In this discussion of the text as social practice we have, so far, confined ourselves to the relationship between text and what might be called the “macro-level” of the context, namely society as a whole. The next step will be to take the discussion a bit further and examine the relationship between the text and the “micro-level” of the context, the nucleus of society: the individual.

### III. TEXT AND INDIVIDUAL

The New Historicism is characterized by a unanimous rejection of any form of essentialist humanism which regards man as an autonomous free transcendental essence. The human self is a construct, not an essence. This is one of the two major presuppositions that Jean Howard in an article on the New Historicism<sup>17</sup>

14. *Ibid.*, 34.

15. See especially the essay “Marvelous Possessions” in *ibid.*, 52–85.

16. Quoted by Greenblatt, *ibid.*, 70.

17. Jean Howard, “The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies” in *Renaissance Historicism: Selections from “English Literary Renaissance,”* ed. Arthur F. Kinney and Dan S. Collins (Amherst, Mass., 1987), 3–33.



recognizes as essential to the movement. The second is that the historian or critic is the product of his or her historical moment and only capable of knowing historical alterity through the framework of the present. This second point, Howard suggests, indicates the limits of New Historicist thought since it more or less forces every historical and critical discourse (including the New Historicist) to resign its ultimate truth claims. Greenblatt, therefore, very cautiously shifts the emphasis of his critical labors from theory to practice, theorizing only when his historical and literary analyses can be reasonably thought to support his claims.

There are, however, other New Historicists who are less circumspect in committing themselves to theoretical and even ideological presuppositions, as, for instance, Jonathan Dollimore who takes a more overt political view of the kind of criticism that he practices.<sup>18</sup> Faithful to his Marxist roots, he prefers to distinguish it from the New Historicism, calling it “Cultural Materialism” instead. Like Greenblatt, he sees the human self as a product of its particular historical moment, human experience as constituted by social and ideological structures, and consciousness and cognition as radically historical. But unlike Greenblatt, he is more emphatic in stressing the strategy of ideological struggle in which leading ideologies (which are by definition suspect, according to Dollimore) seek to impress themselves on the individual mind, thereby overruling and marginalizing dissident opinion. Dominant ideology is the enemy and marginalized opinion is the object of vindication. The truth-claims that the ideology-critique of critics like Dollimore involves, are not, as Howard and others<sup>19</sup> pointed out, validated and supported by the premise of the historicity of consciousness. Greenblatt, aware of this possible pitfall, has avoided any emphasis on ideological motives and seems to take a more balanced view of the dialectics of totalization and differentiation.

The dialectics that govern the relationship between the individual and the text, or between the individual and discourse, are elaborated in a book called *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*.<sup>20</sup> In it Greenblatt expounds the conditions under which this fashioning of the self takes place. A self is formed, first, in submission to an “absolute power” or authority (such as the Church, the State, or the Family) and, second, in relation to the Other, the stranger, a category other than authority and branded by the latter as demonic, heretical, subversive, marginal, and so forth. As a result the stranger is either encapsulated and deprived of his otherness or destroyed.<sup>21</sup> This encapsulation involves a loss of self that enables a dialectical retrieval of the self. Self-fashioning takes place

18. See *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester, Eng., 1985).

19. A noteworthy critic of the New Historicism is Edward Pechter. See: “The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama,” *PMLA* 102 (May, 1987), 292–303.

20. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, especially 1–9, 255–257.

21. In an essay entitled “Invisible Bullets” in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 21–65, Greenblatt exemplifies this notion of otherness in an account of the first colonial encounters with Native Americans.

in a double relationship to authority on the one hand and to alterity on the other, and is governed by the by now familiar oscillation between totalization and differentiation.

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* it is stated that the power to fashion the self is an aspect of the power to control identity, a power exercised in the sixteenth century by the State, the Church, and the Family. The age commonly praised for its recognition of man's autonomy is, in fact, marked by a profound awareness of the malleability of the self. Greenblatt stresses that literature, as the unique expression of the process of self-fashioning (man is a "cultural artifact"<sup>22</sup>), must be defined three ways: (1) as the manifestation of the behavior of the author (the object of biographical studies); (2) as an expression of the codes that govern behavior (the object of those who seek to expose ideological substructures); and (3) as a reflection on these codes (the object of those who study art as an autonomous supratemporal phenomenon). In other words, humans fashion, are fashioned, and are aware of being fashioned by discourse. It was Michel Foucault who initially expounded the strategies and operations of power in discourse. His ideas have proved very useful to Greenblatt, who, when interpreting texts, constantly seems to depart from or to arrive at a totality of power that, by undermining and subverting itself, means to confirm itself. In literary exegesis all three definitions of literature must therefore be taken into account, for taken in isolation they will invariably lead to the pitfalls that have hampered and mutilated literary criticism for so long.

Historical and literary texts may engage the whole of the sociohistorical context, but they will most certainly engage the most immediate element of this context: the self of the reader. In the introductory essay of a book called *Learning to Curse*<sup>23</sup> (in what might be called a *confessio lectoris*, or *auditoris* as the case may be<sup>24</sup>) Greenblatt states that narrativity is not so much tied up with the challenge it may pose to the hermeneutical enterprise as with the experience of identity it enhances. Interpretation and self-fashioning are, of course, two aspects of the same process. Narratives and especially historical anecdotes are imbued with a disturbing and alienating otherness that defies abstraction and generalization and that refuses to be embedded in a larger structure or a totalizing history. At the same time they are expressed by the authoritative voice of the narrator who in the act of telling is in quest of a solid foundation for the self, but who is also in constant peril of losing the object of his search. Greenblatt explains that story-telling is something obsessive and compulsive, an unquenchable urge in the human psyche. He mentions the *Arabian Nights* and Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* as literary instances in which this urge (which is actually an urge for survival, certainly in the case of Scheherazade) is thematized. It seems that our awareness of identity and of the dialectic it involves is basically enhanced by a textual or narrative track.

22. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 3.

23. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, 1–15.

24. *Ibid.*, especially 5–9.

It may prove useful to compare these ideas to those of Paul Ricoeur, the venerated representative of a more traditional and, in New Historicist eyes, more monological hermeneutics. Ricoeur discusses the nature of textuality in relation to the accretion of self-knowledge. For Ricoeur, a text is something other than a simple fixation of speech; a text may actually displace an interlocutor. A speaker engages the immediacy of the circumambient world in his words, but this immediacy of the world is lost to the written text that, once written and not yet read, remains in abeyance. This condition of suspended referentiality is countered by the process of reading and interpretation through which the text is relocated in the world. The rupture the emancipation of the text has caused between language and the world and between language and the interlocutors remains, however, a fact since there is no guarantee that the worlds of author and reader concur. "The autonomy of the text," Ricoeur writes, "contains the possibility to withdraw what Gadamer calls the 'Sache' of a text from the finite intentional horizon of its author; the 'world' of a *text* may, in fact, through inscription, cause the world of the *author to explode*."<sup>25</sup>

What does Ricoeur mean by this "world of the text"? Referring to the distinctions Frege made between meaning (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*), according to which meanings are wholly immanent to the linguistic system (as in a dictionary) with no reference to reality, and according to which references occur only in actual linguistic usage, Ricoeur explains how in a text linguistic usage is deprived of its deictic function, so that with the suspension of the reference to reality the phenomenon we call literature emerges. Though poetry and fiction eliminate this first order reference, there is still what Ricoeur calls a second order reference to reality, namely an articulation of our being in the world (Heidegger's *in der Welt sein*) which hermeneutics must set itself as a task to interpret. This "proposition for a world," a potential reality that offers new possibilities of being in the world, is what Ricoeur means by the world of the text.

This "world of the text" a reader must appropriate in the process of reading. "Appropriation" is a problematical term since it does not imply mastering a text or invading it with one's preconceptions. The text very much sets the terms on which the interpretive encounter takes place. Inscription, we have seen, is marked by distancing. Interpretation can therefore never mean identification of or with an *intentio auctoris*. Furthermore this distancing implies self-abnegation: in reading the reader loses him- or herself. Ricoeur opposes the tradition of the Cartesian *cogito* that assures us we have intuitive, immediate, and unmitigated self-knowledge, and asserts that self-knowledge is only established via the longest possible detour. This detour is the distancing of a text

25. Paul Ricoeur, "La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation; III. Le rapport de la parole et de l'écriture" in *Du Texte à l'action: essais d'herméneutique II* (Paris, 1986), 111. (The English paraphrase is mine, J.V.) The original passage reads: "Dans cette autonomie du texte est, en revanche, déjà contenue la possibilité que ce que Gadamer appelle la 'chose' du texte soit soustraite à l'horizon intentionnel fini de son auteur; autrement dit, grâce à l'écriture, le 'monde' du *texte* peut faire éclater le monde de l'*auteur*." See also the essay "Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?," especially 137-142.

since it is only through texts, especially literary texts, that we have a notion of the self (so Ricoeur believes). In this sense a text may be said to expropriate an interpreter as much as the interpreter appropriates the text. In this process of appropriation “the world of the text” informs the reader, who, consequently, becomes aware of a new potentialized subjectivity. Fiction is a fundamental dimension of the reference of a text but equally so of the subjectivity of the reader.<sup>26</sup> In this way a text fashions and creates its readers.

The similarities in approach between Greenblatt and Ricoeur are apparent, and so are at least some of the major differences. That the practice of reading and interpretation is dialectical in nature is recognized by both, and so is the notion that interpretation is a major force in the fashioning of identity. Both are also very much aware of the fact that a text articulates a kind of *Sache* that transcends the finite intentional horizon of the author. The important difference, however, is that Greenblatt sees the “world of the text” in ideological terms, or in terms of Foucault’s concept of power, which does not allow of a dissociation of the “world of the text” from the world of the sociohistorical context. Discourse is never free from the social structure in which it is embedded and in which it acquires its meaning. Ricoeur’s emphasis on the emancipation of the text, that for him seems undeniable because there is no guarantee for the concurrence of the worlds of author and reader, is unacceptable to Greenblatt, not because he believes this concurrence will actually take place, but because he believes that the worlds of author and reader are not separate spheres in the first place; self and society are too profoundly interrelated to allow such a separation. With some irony one might conclude that where Ricoeur attempts to differentiate, Greenblatt tries to integrate. Greenblatt also denies the world of the text any form of autonomy so that there is no actual need for a concept like second order reference. The finite intentional horizon of the author is not shattered by the act of inscription, simply because the author’s first order reference is so much informed by the social context that it transcends his intentionality anyway.

According to Ricoeur, the autonomous text confronts and informs the reader with a new world of potential being. Exploring the new world in the act of reading produces a loss of self and a refiguration of the self as new potentialities materialize in new acts in one’s return to the old world of active everyday life, after reading. In denying the autonomy of the text Greenblatt more radically politicizes reading and interpretation, making it an aspect of social practice and identity formation, which in itself is also more radical, since Greenblatt would deny Ricoeur’s implication of a pre-existent self. If the text is a function in an overall pattern of power relations that fashion self and society, the scope of interpretive freedom that Ricoeur attributes to the reader is seriously questioned. *Marvelous Possessions* tries to show that the power strategies that produced the Age of Conquest also produced the texts that accompanied the most

26. *Ibid.*, 117.

extreme instances of appropriation. But perhaps this does not reflect on Greenblatt himself since, as Edward Pechter pointed out, with a reference to Dryden, he “invades authors like a monarch, and what would be theft in others is only victory in him.”<sup>27</sup> Pechter emphasizes that Greenblatt’s interpretive conquest aims at mastering the text before the text masters him. Far from being passive or from being the object of fashioning, the interpreter rebels and exerts her- or himself in an effort to produce new and original meanings.

But why and how do texts matter to us? We have seen how the text is tightly woven into its context. We now have to examine the threads that keep this fabric together.

#### IV. NEGOTIATION AND EXCHANGE

Hermes, the winged messenger of the gods, is said to be the god of both commerce and interpretation, two activities that in Greenblatt’s view are not as dissimilar as might first appear. In *Shakespearean Negotiations* he endeavors to articulate the various ways in which the meaning of a literary text (in this case Shakespeare’s) is constituted, as well as the basis on which this meaning rests. The conventional and all too often inadequate idiom commonly used for capturing the intricate relationships between the text and its context (such as allegory, symbolism, mimesis, and so on) is supplanted by a phraseology that seems to be metaphorical, but that, at the same time, embodies a sustained attempt to subsume all forms of social production, be it literary or mercantile, under a common descriptive idiom.

Greenblatt’s option for the economic metaphor is not a random choice. Neither is it an attempt to enliven the language of criticism, “decking the sense, as if it were to sell.” An elaborate application of this metaphor can be found in the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who, like Greenblatt, believes that all discourse derives its value and meaning from the market in which it functions.<sup>28</sup> The metaphor, and especially the idea of the free market, is also a direct consequence of Greenblatt’s appreciation of capitalism. From the earlier mentioned comparison of Jameson and Lyotard it will have become clear that Greenblatt does not share their rejection of capitalism as either a totalizing or differentiating system of repression. Instead, one gets the impression that capitalism, in enhancing an oscillation between totalization and differentiation, is not so much a repressive as a productive force. In the atmosphere of negotiation and exchange, of circulation of different currencies, the borders between individuals, nations, different classes, and social circuits are easily crossed and hence called into question. Such commercial intercourse and mer-

27. Pechter, 302.

28. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, transl. G. Raymond and M. Adamson (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), 76. See also Bourdieu’s intriguing essay “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods” in *Media, Culture, and Society* 2 (1980), 261–293.

cantile enterprise requires above all the mobilization of private initiative and, hence, the production of individuality. For Greenblatt this notion of commercial traffic encompasses not only the economic but also the social and the artistic domain. The relationship between art and society is characterized by processes of negotiation and exchange that are as complicated as those in the economic domain.

As was illustrated in the opening paragraphs of this essay, the pattern of negotiation and exchange may take a piece of literary discourse, like Shakespeare's *Richard II*, beyond the conventional limits of the theater into "open streets and houses" where it receives new meanings and fashions new identities, as Queen Elizabeth much to her displeasure noticed. Such displacements are not anomalies, according to Greenblatt, not pirated versions of authorized artistic productions, that properly belong to the theater. These literary productions are not private property; their authors do not have a hold on them (the auctorial self is, after all, as elusive as the reader's), since they only exist as phenomena in the common public market. It is here that Greenblatt's Marxist roots surface most clearly. A play, or any text, exists only through the meaningfulness it derives from the market in which both the living and the dead share.

In the opening chapter of *Shakespearean Negotiations*, entitled "The Circulation of Social Energy," Greenblatt confesses how his historical and literary interests, his "desire to speak with the dead," had initially led him to the erroneous suppositions of the transparency of the text and the accessibility of the *intentio auctoris*. A text, however, is neither mimetic, in that it simply reflects the world of the dead, nor essentialistic, in that it testifies to the confrontation between a "total artist" and a "totalizing society." Instead, speaking with the dead, reading texts, will involve a moment of self-abnegation, of self-fashioning. It instills in us the awareness that we are not the authors of our identity. In the text we do not encounter the voice of the individual other, but the many voices of the market that also conditions and informs our own discourse. With a nostalgia for a more traditional and innocent hermeneutics, Greenblatt formulates it thus:

I had dreamed of speaking with the dead, and even now I do not abandon this dream. But the mistake was to imagine that I would hear a single voice, the voice of the other. If I wanted to hear one, I had to hear the many voices of the dead. And if I wanted to hear the voice of the other, I had to hear my own voice. The speech of the dead, like my own speech, is not private property.<sup>29</sup>

Interpreting texts is interpreting the market that informs these texts. Interpreting Columbus, interpreting the discourse of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century exploration, is estimating the value of mimetic capital (that is, the representations of alterity) either as it circulates as a common currency, or as it is "banked" in "books, archives, collections, and cultural storehouses."<sup>30</sup> But what do we

29. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 20.

30. Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 6.

interpret when we read, for example, Shakespeare? What sense is “decked” by the economic metaphor when we apply it to the meaning of literature, or texts in general? In *Shakespearean Negotiations* Greenblatt devises a materialistic explanation of the principle of meaning and value, by identifying the currency that circulates in patterns of negotiation and exchange as social energy. The joy, pain, anxiety, relief, and countless other emotions a text or a play may inspire in its audience is a result of the “social energy” encoded in these works. This life of the literary work materializes in the props, the stories, the costumes, the language, the metaphors, the symbols, the ceremonies that go to make up a play. All these devices do not spring from the mind of a “total artist,” but they are appropriated (as, for example, spoken language or common expressions), purchased (such as props and stories), or symbolically acquired (such as certain ceremonies like exorcism, as we will see later on) by the stage.<sup>31</sup> In the performance the social energy, decoded by the audience, flows back through the public into society, from whence it may return again to the stage. If this is true, Queen Elizabeth’s uneasiness about the performance of a play that may mean what its audience means and that easily crosses the porous borders of the playhouse into “the open streets and houses” was well-founded.

Greenblatt does not clearly differentiate social energy from (other?) forms of social production. He simply states that, since there is “no exhaustive and definitive cultural poetics,” everything produced by a society qualifies as social energy, and as examples of this he lists: “power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, wonder, desire, anxiety, religious awe, free-floating intensities of experience,”<sup>32</sup> all of which are psycho-physical phenomena. Greenblatt is conspicuously imprecise here. A distinction between intensities of experience and the cultural products that enhance or embody these experiences is necessary to explain why and how cultural *poiesis* works. The various social energies provide the motives for humans’ primary activities which, Greenblatt believes, are not material but symbolical. Texts are part of this symbolic production, and so are all social artifacts, including history. The social energy that can circulate freely in this symbolic order at the same time constitutes the basis for the existence of this symbolic order. It functions not only as a currency, but also as an “undercurrency.” Judging from the examples listed above, one may conclude that social energy, being very much part of the psychological and physical make-up of the human being, is the material substratum of the symbolic realm and *not* a form of social production. Texts matter to us because we have invested some of our most vital emotions in these cultural artifacts. These social energies are returned to us, with interest, when we consume these social products, when we interpret texts. Ultimately meaning and social energy are synonymous.

Hermeneutics, for Greenblatt, is above all a practice. It is in his interpretation of texts that his ideas on textuality find their most engaging expression. A brief

31. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 9–11.

32. *Ibid.*, 19.

discussion of two of his case-studies will not only do justice to Greenblatt's work, but will also fittingly illuminate the various aspects of his hermeneutics expounded in the preceding sections.

#### V. INTERPRETING SHAKESPEARE

The two essays from *Shakespearean Negotiations* that we will discuss presently, "Fiction and Friction" and "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," testify to Greenblatt's preference for the differentiating forces of cultural dialectics. He focuses on marginalized groups, individuals, and phenomena in society, and in interpreting texts departs not from the main plot, but from the "margin," the subplot. Like the earlier mentioned *petites histoires*, these "marginalia" are supposed to defy any attempts to integrate them in a total and totalizing structure. This is somewhat doubtful when we look at Greenblatt's interpretive approach. Departing from a seemingly insignificant feature of a text, Greenblatt proceeds to locate this minor feature in a larger cultural context, where all of a sudden it gains immense meaning potential, which may cast an entirely new light on the text which he set out to interpret. This much insisted upon "central significance of marginality"<sup>33</sup> is, in fact, simply a displacement of centers, a different focus in an otherwise comprehensive interpretive grasp. Though New Historicists will be reluctant to admit this, their readings are as monological, as "totalizing," as those of the "old historicism" they reject. One may concede, however, that they see more than the giants on whose shoulders they refuse to admit they are standing, and Greenblatt especially looks in new directions. A reader's finite intentional horizon is not a thing "out there" in the distance, it is a property of his perception. Though we can never escape it, we can, by moving about, integrate new landscapes within its confines. In the following paragraphs I will explore the patterns of negotiation and exchange that Greenblatt detects in two of Shakespeare's plays and their sociohistorical contexts.

In the essay "Fiction and Friction"<sup>34</sup> Greenblatt discusses Renaissance identity formation in relation to a rather important and recurrent motif in Elizabethan drama; the theme of cross-dressing and mistaken sexual identities. He does so by juxtaposing a rather grotesque story from an early seventeenth-century textbook: *Des Hermaphrodits, accouchemens des femmes, et traitement qui est requis pour les releuer en santé, et bien eleuer leurs enfans*, by Jacques Duval (Rouen, 1603) and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

Duval gives an account of how the intended marriage between a widow named Jeane le Febvre and Marie le Marcis, a young woman who claimed to be a

33. The phrase is Dollimore's. See Jonathan Dollimore, "Critical Developments: Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Gender Critique, and New Historicism," in *Shakespeare: A Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford, 1991), 405–428. See also Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 4.

34. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 66–93.



man, aroused public scandal and led to the trial and condemnation of Marie (who, in order to procure a new sexual identity, renamed him/herself Marin) on the charge of sodomy. An apparently rather superficial medical examination did not yield the desired signs of masculinity at first, but a more probing research conducted by Jacques Duval finally did procure the genital characteristics that eventually caused the annulment of the death penalty and the release of Marin and Jeane. The account does not show us “the margins of normative individualism,” but gives us an idea of the “discourse out of which historically specific subjects were fashioned” and “communally incorporated.”<sup>35</sup> In each person this discourse implants a “defining off-center weight” (for instance, a mix-up of the sexual roles) that plays a critical role in the shaping of identity. The matrimonial aspirations of Jeane and Marin can, therefore, mark a movement from particular individuality toward communal norms and public recognition, mainly because the Renaissance “tended to sharpen its sense of the normative by meditating upon the prodigious.”<sup>36</sup> This interest in the prodigious Greenblatt sees as characteristic of Renaissance society in which the sexual roles, he asserts, were far less stable than is commonly presumed. The subversion of these roles constitutes the very dialectical negation through which a totalizing society can establish itself. This confusion of gender, this “defining off-center weight,” can also be seen at work in the “scandalous shadow story” that continually haunts Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*.

Though this comedy is essentially a wonderfully confused charade of disguises and amorous intricacies that are all neatly resolved at the end, it is also “a spectacle of homoerotic desire.” The main plot presents us with the coupling of the perfect prince, Sebastian, and the virtuous and wealthy countess Olivia, yet the shadow plot of cross-dressing and cross-coupling exerts considerable strain on the reassuring pattern of social and sexual roles that the play re-establishes in its final scene. Viola disguises herself as the young man Cesario and wins the affection of the countess Olivia who, though only for a brief moment, believes herself to be married to Cesario (*TN*, V, i: 141ff.).<sup>37</sup> Cesario is in love with “his” master Orsino, who pines for the affection of the countess, but is evidently mysteriously attracted to his page (cf. V, i: 123ff.). Even in the warm friendship that Antonio bears Sebastian (Viola’s twin brother) Greenblatt detects erotic overtones (cf. II, i: 34–35, 43–47). “Licit sexuality in *Twelfth Night*—the only craving that the play can represent as capable of finding satisfaction—depends upon a movement that deviates from the desired object straight in one’s path toward a marginal object, a body one scarcely knows. Nature is an *unbalancing* act.”<sup>38</sup> Neither Orsino nor Olivia marry the person they desire. Orsino, thinking he loves Olivia, ends up marrying Viola. Olivia,

35. *Ibid.*, 75.

36. *Ibid.*, 77.

37. References are based on the following edition: Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, The Arden Shakespeare (London, 1975).

38. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 68.

in love with Cesario, marries his spitting image Sebastian. Only Viola gets whom she consciously wanted by subjecting to the strategy of swerving which is an “essential life-truth: you reach a desired or at least desirable destination not by pursuing a straight line but by following a curved path.” Until the last scene the course of events seems to challenge well both the sexual and the social order (Viola and Sebastian appear to be beneath Olivia’s station). This final scene, however, sees to the proper mating of the couples and reassuringly reveals the noble background of the twins. This Saturnalian reversal of social and sexual roles need not threaten the prevailing order for, as a critic once asserted, “when the normal is secure, playful aberration is benign.”<sup>39</sup> Yet the homoerotic affections are too insistent, the blurring of gender<sup>40</sup> too much insisted upon to be dismissed as playful aberration. Making the shadow story disappear in the light of end-scene reassurance is for Greenblatt a formalist means of missing the point of the play. Only a foregrounding of this shadow story and a proper evaluation of nature’s deviant movement will reveal the patterns of negotiation and exchange that link the play to its context, and in particular to the social discourse of the body.

In a further analysis of Duval’s discourse Greenblatt tries to show why and how the blurring of gender in *Twelfth Night* and *Des Hermaphrodits* contributes to the fashioning of identity. In Duval’s text Greenblatt detects a dual account of the origin of gender, both theories being at least as old as the works of Galen. Both theories hinge on the notion of vital heat (*calor vitalis* in Stoic terminology), the abundance of which was thought to cause masculine strength, spirituality, and intellectual force, and the lack of which was seen as a sure sign of the cool, passive, and weak constitution of the woman.<sup>41</sup> This heat was essential for procreation. Both man and woman were thought to produce semen, a life-fluid generated only, so experience taught, through excess of heat. Sexual play, erotic friction, and, in regard of her cooler nature, the arousal of the woman’s desire were absolutely necessary in the promotion of fertility. According to one theory, sexual differentiation is established by a struggle between male and female elements in the body. The human being, in this case, has a double nature that eventually becomes single. According to the other theory, female genitals are an inverted version of male genitals, and in order to attain their sexual identity men have to “pass through women,” through a female stage, as it were. Male genitals would be “forced out” through bodily heat whereas with women, who were defective in heat, the organs would remain internal. Female physiology was apparently one step short of nature’s final perfection which was shown in the genital protrusion of the male body. Thus this theory envisaged one unitary genital structure that could divide into two distinct forms, internal and external: a single nature becoming double.

39. *Ibid.*, 72. Greenblatt quotes C. L. Barber.

40. See, for example, Sebastian’s lines in V, i: 257–261.

41. Cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), 10.

Ancient theories such as these on the inherent twinship of all individuals and on genital homology were in the process of being refuted by Renaissance medical science. Such refutations, no doubt, conveniently contributed to safeguarding a harmonious accord between sex and gender. Yet in opposition to this clear distinction between the sexes, the other theories, Greenblatt urges, were quite persistent. The determination of gender and identity, he suggests, was based on both the confirmation and the subversion of the sexual roles. The idea of swerving was a structural necessity, an oscillation between totalization and differentiation, and, as such, an important aspect of the dialectics of self-fashioning. Hence transvestism in *Twelfth Night* “represents a structural identity between man and woman,” without *presenting* this identity as a reality.<sup>42</sup> This sexual confusion is not a “benign” play with established certainties, but is the very basis of these certainties. A play like *Twelfth Night* can represent such sexual confusion because the confusion is part of the discourse that the theater has in common with medical texts such as Duval’s.

The most central notion in this discourse is not simply the blurring of gender, but, more specifically, the erotic friction that accompanies the formation of sexual identity. Friction was an essential element of the two theories mentioned above, but it was also crucial in Duval’s examination of Marin, whose masculinity could only be ascertained through erotic chafing. This chafing Shakespeare purchased or appropriated, and because it could not be staged literally, he fictionalized it in transvestite representations (in the double sense of male actors playing the parts of female characters, and female characters dressing up as male characters), and, above all, in verbal wit, in “the wantonness of language.” Through the performance the erotic power could be returned to the audience “with interest” as part of the process of negotiation and exchange.

It was exactly this function of the stage that made the Puritan enemies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater condemn the playhouse as a place of erotic arousal. Both Greenblatt and Shakespeare (the latter by word of the former) curiously confirm these charges. For the religious mind individuality is fashioned through the mediation of one’s allegiance to one’s Creator. For the secular mind, however, the artistic medium might be deemed a more fitting means of fashioning the self. If the Puritan mind was at all hermeneutically inclined one might surmise that the main objection to the theater was that people who visited these places were opting for the wrong kind of individuality. In fact, the Puritan accusation is for Greenblatt an important argument in support of the rather materialist conception that erotic heat individuates.

The essay “Fiction and Friction” clearly illustrates the link between identity formation and a certain kind of social energy, which, it will be clear, is not private property. Its circulation is enhanced by the linguistic and theatrical representations that Greenblatt examines. In the case of *Twelfth Night*, part of these representations are, no doubt, the intricacies of the plot, such as cross-

42. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 82.

dressing and the ensuing mistaken sexual identities. Curiously enough Greenblatt prefers to see the swerving in the play as an “essential life-truth” and the mix-up of sexual roles, the prodigious, as a “defining off-center weight,” as an “unbalancing act” of “nature.” These are rather monological and essentialistic notions for something that is, after all, part of discourse and hence a form of social production. The texts of Duval and Shakespeare apparently turn erotic heat into a valid currency by thematizing the prodigious, but Greenblatt’s statement that the Renaissance as a whole does the same is curiously monological. In view of the radical historicity of thought and consciousness, it is a claim that Greenblatt can never substantiate. The fact that *Twelfth Night* and *Des Hermaphrodites* focus on the prodigious in order to promote the circulation of social energy does not rule out the equally attestable alternative that a textual representation of the “normal” sexual roles will do the same. The “Renaissance” that Greenblatt talks about is basically the Renaissance as it is brought about by the kind of discourse he uses in describing it. The emphasis on the prodigious, therefore, seems to be a direct result of the doctrine of the “central significance of marginality.”

Through this doctrine New Historicists claim to speak for the marginalized, the oppressed, and for everything peripheral a society turns its back on.<sup>43</sup> But we cannot speak for the dead without speaking for ourselves. As noble representatives of the oppressed, New Historicists (and Greenblatt is particularly successful in this) manage to produce an intriguing and exciting discourse, telling wonderful tales of the unexpected that are always a step ahead of readers, and that try to convince them of the hidden truths of unobtrusive details. New Historicists renegotiate, as it were, the thrill of discovering the Secret as well as the sense of mystery that lurks in all dark corners. Perhaps the old fantastical duke Vincentio best illustrates the procedures of New Historicist hermeneutics. Vincentio keeps an eye on his dukedom from an unsuspected vantage-point. Likewise, the exploration of a text from an unusual angle can prove to be most illuminating. But the duke can emerge from under the friar’s hood only after having assumed the disguise first. Likewise, the marginal or peripheral will reveal the central only after an interpreter has fashioned the margin as an appropriate vehicle for such a revelation. The sexual and social roles which *Twelfth Night* finally confirms are only subverted because the cross-dressing in the play is interpreted as a deviant movement that enhances individuality. Shakespeare’s “purchase” of erotic friction from Duval is not factual; it exists only as a hermeneutical transaction in Greenblatt’s cultural poetics.

Greenblatt explores a more demonstrable pattern of negotiation and exchange in “Shakespeare and the Exorcists.”<sup>44</sup> He draws attention to the close relationship that exists between *King Lear* and a book by Samuel Harsnett called *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures, to withdraw the hearts of her Maiesties Subjects from their allegiance, and from the Truth of Christian Reli-*

43. Cf. Dollimore, “Critical Developments,” 409.

44. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 94–128.

*gion professed in England, under the pretence of casting out devils* (London, 1603). Conventional source-study, though confirming that Shakespeare knew the book when he wrote *King Lear*, usually confines a comparison of both texts to simply listing the borrowing of words and phrases, such as the names of the demons which are mentioned by Edgar, disguised as the madman Poor Tom,<sup>45</sup> and which are all carefully listed in explanatory notes and references. Greenblatt tries to show that the relationship is more complex and traces the pattern of negotiation and exchange by taking as his point of departure a marginalized group in society: the possessed.

Harsnett's book records a number of spectacular exorcisms conducted by a group of Jesuits in the years 1585 and 1586. Being a weapon in the Protestant struggle against Catholicism, the book denounces these Jesuit practices as fraudulent, relocating the demonic not in the allegedly possessed, but in the exorcists themselves. The work evidently figures in a society that sought to redefine its central values, especially the definition of the sacred, since it was the sacred that legitimized authority. For centuries the charisma of exorcism had been both the epitome and the epiphany of the sacred in Latin Christianity. Protestantism naturally tried "to cap permanently the great rushing geysers of charisma"<sup>46</sup> released in these rituals. Acting upon the premise that demonic possession was either a fake or a direct consequence of the therapy designed to cure it, the Anglicans could, by incriminating the exorcist ritual, remove these "impostures" from the church to the courtroom, where the devil was defeated "through the simple expedient of hanging his human agents."<sup>47</sup>

Realizing that exorcism was a common enough New Testament practice, they did not deny Satan's influence but suggested that Satan either possessed the exorcists or produced an illusion of demonic possession. The charisma of the exorcist ritual depended solely upon the impression it made upon the minds of the spectators and it was realized that this impression could be enhanced and manipulated by scripted performance. Harsnett emphasized (paradoxically enough on the basis of a deep-rooted belief in the existence of devils) the inauthenticity of possession and found the theater a suitable explanatory model for these Catholic practices. After all, "acknowledging theatricality kills the credibility of the supernatural"<sup>48</sup> and for Harsnett the theater was a synonym of falsity, the essence even of Catholicism. Some Puritan polemicists were very fierce in their condemnation of the theater (perhaps in view of its Dionysian origins) and saw the demonic in the theatrical. Harsnett confined himself to exposing the theatrical in the demonic, since for him the theater was a place of acknowledged fictionality without pretense to truth.

45. See, e.g., *King Lear*, III, iv: 144–148 and IV, i: 55–63. Quotes and references are based on the following edition: Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London, 1952).

46. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 97.

47. *Ibid.*, 99.

48. *Ibid.*, 109.

The aggressive tendency in Protestantism to drive the Catholic church into the theater sometimes even caused Catholic clerical garments to be literally sold to players and their companies, who were willing to pay more for a good costume than for a good play, since not only the garment but also its symbolic power would be acquired.<sup>49</sup> In a similar way, Greenblatt argues, Harsnett “sells” the exorcist ritual to the theater, and Shakespeare, in reading the *Declaration*, accepts the offer and stages, not only exorcism, but also “Harsnett on exorcism.”

To support his claim Greenblatt refers to the scene in *King Lear* in which Edgar, feigning to be the madman Poor Tom, accompanies his blind father, the Earl of Gloucester, to the cliffs of Dover, where the latter plans to take a desperate leap, having in the painful process of losing his eyes gained clear insight into the devious intentions of his bastard son Edmund. Still clinging to his role of possessed madman, Edgar makes his father believe they are standing on a steep cliff, emphasizing that the poor man’s senses have grown too feeble to get a good impression of the surroundings, persuading him that the even ground they stand on is, in fact, a steep slope (*KL*, IV, vi: 1–24). When Gloucester throws himself forward, he simply falls to the ground. Edgar, immediately switching roles, now pretends to be a bystander at the foot of the cliff who, Greenblatt adds, “has seen a demon depart from the old man.”<sup>50</sup>

Edgar: This is above all strangeness.

Upon the crown o’ th’ cliff what thing was that  
Which parted from you?

Gloucester: A poor unfortunate beggar.

E.: As I stood here below methought his eyes  
Were two full moons; he had a thousand noses,  
Horns whelk’d and wav’d like the enridged sea:  
It was some fiend; therefore, thou happy father,  
Think that the clearest Gods, who make them honours  
Of men’s impossibilities, have preserved thee.

G.: I do remember now; henceforth I’ll bear  
Affliction till it do cry out itself  
“Enough, enough,” and die. That thing you speak of  
I took it for a man; often ’twould say  
“The Fiend, the Fiend”: he led me to that place.

(IV, vi: 66–79)

In order to remedy the suicidal despair of his father (IV, vi: 33–34) Edgar has brought about an emotional crisis by means of a fake exorcism, a theatrical performance in which the senses are deceived.

One could criticize this reading by pointing out that the scene does not depict an exorcism, because, in the first place, there is no exorcist, and, in the second place, because the “fiend” that parted from Gloucester was not actually *inside* the man but was rather a demon in the guise of Poor Tom. As to the second

49. Greenblatt stresses that Elizabethan culture was marked by a “fetishistic obsession with clothes as a mark of status and degree.” See *ibid.*, 113.

50. *Ibid.*, 118.

point, one might argue that Shakespeare does not make it altogether clear what Edgar wants his father to believe. Is the “thing” that Gloucester mistook for a man supposed to be a demon in his head or a demon walking beside him? The difference seems trivial and of no consequence for the general idea of the theatricality of demonic affliction. The first point, however, raises an interesting question.

Greenblatt stresses the many passages in Shakespeare’s plays in which exorcism is considered fraudulent,<sup>51</sup> and also the present scene in *King Lear* thematizes feigned possession. Though he does not pretend to be an exorcist, Edgar nevertheless tries to “exorcise” his father’s despair by demonizing his troubled state of mind. Does this make him an imposter of the type that Harsnett rejects in his book? Edgar’s motives for feigning his madness and for staging a little exorcism in act IV, scene vi, namely the urge for survival and the love of his father, are on the contrary quite commendable. In this sense Harsnett’s intentions are undermined. The exorcist’s charisma could soothe the anguish, rage, and frustration to which the possessed in this impoverished and plague-ridden world gave voice.<sup>52</sup> If exorcists are frauds, redemptive hope is shattered. Harsnett simply wanted to rid the world of exorcisms. Shakespeare, on the other hand, realized the need for exorcism and intensified this need as a theatrical experience.<sup>53</sup>

The shadow story of Gloucester and his sons mirrors the main plot of Lear and his daughters. Both fathers are driven to despair and insanity by the viciousness and brutality of their offspring. Gloucester has an exorcist: Edgar. Lear has none. This “emptying out of redemptive hope”<sup>54</sup> gives the play its particular gloom and despondency, and also testifies to the religious power that the play generates. With a characteristic taste for paradox, Greenblatt hopes to have demonstrated the “acquisition of religious power through the evacuation of a religious ritual.”<sup>55</sup>

We should bear in mind, however, that this religious power, this charisma, is not the kind of power that Harsnett saw as the proper alternative for the charisma of exorcism. Shakespeare does not seek to represent or renegotiate the religious authority of the Catholic exorcists or their Protestant opponents. Instead, the power of the play mainly consists in its depiction of the predicament that the evacuation of the exorcist ritual causes, namely the unanswered need for salvation. Shakespeare recognizes the needs of the possessed, and at the background of his recognition is the awareness of the validity of redemptive hope. The fact that our culture has embraced *King Lear* shows that these needs are still with us. Though many no longer believe in exorcist rituals and though the theater marks them out as fraudulent, a play such as *King Lear* still “intensi-

51. *Ibid.*, 114ff.

52. *Ibid.*, 99.

53. *Ibid.*, 126.

54. *Ibid.*, 124. Greenblatt refers to C. L. Barber, who called this aspect of the play “post-Christian” since Lear’s sorrows are not redeemed.

55. *Ibid.*, 20.

fies our need for these ceremonies” basically because these ceremonies have “for centuries been bound up with the display of power at the center of society.”<sup>56</sup> Apparently Greenblatt seems to think we are in desperate need of this centralized power as well as its subversion (authority and alterity are necessary conditions for identity formation), but he leaves us with the problem that the play derives its meaning and strength from the circulation of a currency (the representation of a ritual) that no one values. If we do not believe the exorcism, why would we need the religious power that it conveys?

Despite his intriguing exposition of Harsnett’s book as a source of inspiration for *King Lear*, Greenblatt does not succeed in elucidating the pattern of negotiation and exchange. The ascertainable link between the *Declaration* and *King Lear* does not show us the even flow of the undercurrent of religious power from one text to another. It does enable us to read *King Lear* as an interpretation of Harsnett, which Greenblatt admits when he says that the play evacuates not only exorcism but also Harsnett’s attack on exorcism.<sup>57</sup> But the acquisition of religious power (in the sense meant by Greenblatt) is no concern of Shakespeare’s. It is part of an explanatory model that hopes to account for the charisma that the play acquired in its reception throughout the centuries. In other words, the conveyance of religious power occurs only in Greenblatt’s hermeneutics.

In his analyses of *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*, Greenblatt tries to articulate what these plays are actually about, what their meaning is, when the meaning of a literary work is no longer conceived of as an immanent center but as a relationship with the sociohistorical context. He tries to make these relationships tangible with the use of economic metaphors. These relationships then become patterns of negotiation and exchange via which symbolic goods and, most importantly, social energy can circulate. Potentially at least, one’s field of interpretation is vastly extended through this new concept of meaning, and unfortunately Greenblatt does not provide a suitable heuristic for tracing the desired patterns of negotiation and exchange in the totality of the market. He does not even justify his choice of Duval and Harsnett. Furthermore, as we have seen, the circulation of social energy cannot always be traced unambiguously. “Intensities of experience” and certainly charisma and religious power are the result of interpretive procedures and cannot escape the finite intentional horizon of the critic. It is therefore problematical to see social energy as an actual phenomenon, even more so since the more material goods with which it is tied up (the actual conditions under which plays were staged in the Elizabethan era, the props, the costumes, and so on) seem to fall somewhat beyond the scope of Greenblatt’s interpretive enterprise. This is odd, since the material conditions of performance are as much part of the sociohistorical context as the texts by Duval and Harsnett, and will have provided a wider and more direct channel

56. *Ibid.*, 128.

57. *Ibid.*, 126.



for the conveyance of social energy to the audience than the books by the French doctor and the English Protestant, which only very few people in this audience (if any) would have read.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

The critical notes that I appended to my discussion of Greenblatt's readings of Shakespeare should not distract us from the obvious merits of his approach. Most of the problems arise from the rather forceful claims New Historicists tend to make on behalf of their own interpretive methods. Despite their attempt to focus on the marginal, and to redefine the concept of meaning, New Historicism and Poetics of Culture are not less monological, not less comprehensive in their interpretive grasp than the more traditional hermeneutics they reject. The insistence on the novelty of their approach sometimes obstructs the awareness of the limitations that the historicity of consciousness, or one's finite intentional horizon, imposes on one's critical labors. When Greenblatt expounds his ideas on textuality as a form of social production in a larger sociohistorical context, in a market that generates and is generated by the circulation of social energy, he does not emphasize that this market is largely a context beyond ken and that, as far as it is knowable, it is only known and conceived in terms of his Poetics of Culture. Since Greenblatt explores this market basically through the examination of *symbolic* goods (texts that have to be interpreted) instead of material goods,<sup>58</sup> the social energy he tries to articulate exists only in and as his interpretation and not as a verifiable historical "object." Bearing in mind these limitations, we are able to see Poetics of Culture in its proper perspective, namely that of a genuine hermeneutics.

I started my survey of Greenblatt's ideas by inquiring into the nature of textuality, since this seemed the proper focus for examining a theory of interpretation, even though this theory claims to be a practice. From the discussion of the relation between text and context it will have become clear that Greenblatt's Poetics of Culture has a number of important characteristics in common with hermeneutical philosophies such as Gadamer's or Ricoeur's. There is the historicity of consciousness; the urge for contextualization; the idea that a text is not simply a thing in itself, but that it exists in and as its effective history (what Gadamer calls *Wirkungsgeschichte*); the idea that a text figures prominently in a process of self-fashioning; that particular kind of hermeneutical circularity that causes the interpreter to arrive at the notions and insights that were more or less his point of departure; and, above all, the ambiguity that is proper to all hermeneutics: the idea of a dialectics of integration and differentiation, of

58. Pechter draws attention to the fact that New Historicists, contrary to what they claim, are not very interested in the particulars of socioeconomic history. In his book on Shakespeare, for instance, Greenblatt does not make use of the available sources that can inform us about the actual staging of the plays. He does not go into the details of the ways in which theater companies acquired props, costumes, actors, stories, and so on, though these particulars would certainly reveal interesting patterns of negotiation and exchange.

sameness and otherness. Gadamer saw the interpreter as being situated between familiarity (that is, the foundation of agreement and consensus on which the world is based) and alterity (the force that ruptures traditional reason and challenges it to new interpretations). Interpretation proceeds via this dialectic, but like Greenblatt's cultural dialectic, it is not a progressive movement (in a Hegelian sense) towards better understanding or absolute knowledge, but an ongoing process that forever renews our "intensities of experience." By virtue of all these similarities, Greenblatt's *Poetics of Culture* qualifies as a genuine hermeneutical practice. There is, however, one major difference between *Poetics of Culture* and the kind of hermeneutics expounded by Ricoeur and Gadamer that has far-reaching consequences for the idea of the text.

As we noted earlier, Ricoeur's idea of the autonomy of the text is based on the implicit distinction that is made between text and context. For Greenblatt, however, author, text, reader, and society are not separate phenomena, but, on the contrary, they are inextricably intertwined, submerged, as it were, in one great continuum. This idea presents Greenblatt with a serious problem. How can alterity, and the differentiating forces of cultural dialectics, that are so important to self and society, be a reality if text and context cannot be dissociated? Any differentiation would be an illusion, the whole scope of social dynamics would be paralyzed, and the text, equally victimized by this "indifference," would neither defy nor solicit interpretation. Perhaps *Poetics of Culture* should try to be a theory as well as a practice and tackle some of the problems it implicitly raises.

Luckily, Greenblatt's practice does not lack a sense of otherness. His readings of literary and historical texts are both intelligent and enticing. They produce surprising new insights in what appeared to be insignificant theatrical conventions, or minor and sometimes unnoticed aspects of a text. By politicizing texts and insisting on the close ties with the sociohistorical environment, Greenblatt not only contributes to our awareness of the importance of texts for certain historical periods, but also makes us realize that society and history are major forces in the production of the meaning of the texts we read. It is as a reader of texts that Greenblatt is most impressive, as any reader of Greenblatt will readily admit. But it is only through his theory of the text that we can discuss and evaluate his practice. By surveying this theory and by forwarding certain reservations and criticisms I hope to have contributed to this discussion.

*University of Groningen*