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Negotiating Greenblatt's Shakespeare: New Historicism and *Shakespearean Negotiations*

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No one will contest the contribution of Stephen Greenblatt to Renaissance studies. His 1980 book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, compelled a rethinking of the rhetorical strategies which underpinned the construction of the "individual" in Elizabethan and Jacobean texts. More recently his own essays, together with the collective work of scholars grouped around the Berkeley journal, *Representations*, have constituted a focal point of new historicist criticism. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* is a book in which the reader will recognize both Greenblatt's earlier concerns and his present preoccupations. It returns to engage the writings of Shakespeare, the figure who unquestionably stood at the centre of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, and it extends the project of new historicism in both the theoretical opening chapter and the subsequent analyses. There can be no doubt that *Shakespearean Negotiations* deserves a wide readership. Greenblatt's readings of Shakespeare's texts will provoke specialists to rethink and re-examine passages or plays which may have become all-too-familiar. But it would be unfortunate if the book were restricted to Renaissance scholars. For especially in a period when literary criticism may have been over-preoccupied with the inner-textual play of tropes and figures, Greenblatt's analyses provide a salutary reminder that a text cannot escape the contingency of history. Critics who are interested in literary theory, in questions about history and its inscription in literary texts will find *Shakespearean Negotiations* a challenging and thought-provoking book.

It is indeed appropriate that Greenblatt prefaces his textual investigations with reflection on his methodological orientation. He sets out to explore what he calls "a poetics of culture," that is, to examine the networks of discourses through which the cultural practices of a society are shaped, and in which aesthetic form acquires social power. As he put it, "I want to know how cultural objects, expressions, and practices — here, principally, plays by Shakespeare and the stage on which they first appeared — acquired compelling force" (5). It is clear that within such terms of inquiry the insights of formalism textual readings, however illuminating, will inevitably fall short of comprehending the text as a cultural practice. For the formalist

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notion of the text as a linguistic artifact — a verbal icon, a well-wrought urn — inevitably stabilizes meanings within a self-sufficient, self-contained entity, an entity which can turn away from the contingent circumstances of history. This conception of the text has been put in question by a series of contemporary theories from post-structuralism to *Rezeptionsästhetik*, and it is not necessary here to rehearse the argumentation against formalist literary criticism. But it is worth noting that formalism was least convincing in conceptualizing dramatic texts whose encoded meanings are inseparable from enunciation and performance. A dramatic text is above all a social enactment. Greenblatt is intrigued by the ways in which the texts of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama are empowered by the traces of long past cultural transactions which are embedded within them. If a text has been invested with the power to provoke laughter or to arouse anxiety, this is because it has inscribed within itself the fragments of forgotten cultural networks. From Greenblatt's perspective, the task of the critic can be described as an attempt to reconstruct these networks of "social energy," a designation which alludes to George Puttenham's retrieval of the term *energia* from the Greek rhetorical tradition. The concentration of social energy within a text represents the complex ways in which the text has challenged, mediated or consented to the collective experiences of a specific historical situation. No critic is able to reanimate and relive that historical moment, recreating it in the way some earlier historicisms had envisioned their project. But it is nonetheless possible, according to Greenblatt, to trace the circulation of social energy encoded within textual constructions.

What critical investigation will illuminate is "a subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a negotiation between joint-stock companies ... extended borrowings, collective exchanges, and mutual enchantments" (7). The language which Greenblatt uses is the language of business transactions. The construction of a text hinges less on an author's creative ability to condense social energy and to give it figuration than on his or her participation in a complicated system of negotiations, of cultural and discursive bartering. Although Greenblatt does not explicate the etymology of the central term in his title, the roots of "negotiation" confirm his usage in a significant and telling way. The word is a compound of the negative prefix, *neg.*, and the Latin *otium* or ease. To negotiate is to be in a state of unease, a state of anxiety. Contemporary meanings of negotiate suggest such apparently contradictory notions as, on the one hand, mastery or conquest (when, for example, a jumping horse negotiates a difficult hurdle) and, on the other hand, mutuality or consensus (when two groups negotiate an agreement). Shakespearean negotiations thus elaborate the difficult operations in which compliance and challenge, consent and subversion are articulated within the

plays. The breathtaking power of Shakespeare's theatre derives not the least from the fact that it could claim to produce imaginary illusions, thereby acquiring "an unusually broad license to conduct its negotiations and exchanges with surrounding institutions, authorities, discourses, and practices" (19).

In the chapters which follow Greenblatt explores the circulation of social energy in a series of dazzling and provocative analyses, all of which revolve around the questions of authority, its construction, challenges to it, and their recontainment. The elaboration of colonial hegemony described in Thomas Harriot's report on the precarious Virginia colony is juxtaposed to the construction of sovereignty in the *Henry IV* plays and *Henry V*; sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theories of hermaphrodism and transvestitism illuminate the representation of sexual energy in *Twelfth Night*; the theatricality and staging of illicit Elizabethan exorcism is found to be reinscribed in *King Lear*; the techniques of evoking and allaying anxiety by withheld pardons or partially staged executions are re-enacted in *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest*. In all of the analyses Greenblatt's interpretive strategy proceeds from a reading of a social or cultural text to a reading of a Shakespearean text which uncovers affiliated figures and tropes. Following Foucault's lead, the two texts are grasped as part of an *episteme* that sets the conceptual limits to the circulation of social energy within.[1]

The insights which this interpretative option yields are amply illustrated by the second chapter of *Shakespearean Negotiations*, "Invisible Bullets," an essay which first appeared in a shorter version in *Glyph* 8 (1981) and was republished in an expanded form in the collection, *Political Shakespeare* (1985); both previous publications bear the subtitle, "Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion." The omission of the subtitle here may signify its enlarged status as the overriding preoccupation of the entire book: the construction and subversion of authority is the dominant thematic principle which organizes all of the essays in *Shakespearean Negotiations*. However this may be, the immediate effect of the shortened title is to focus the reader's attention on the intriguing and arresting phrase. What is an invisible bullet? Is it as lethal as an ordinary one? The answers to these questions are to be found in Greenblatt's reading of Thomas Harriot's book, *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, a 1588 publication which furnished the first account of the young American colony. According to

1 Such a strategy frequently shapes the narratives of new historicist criticism. For an example which is especially striking because of the transnational and transcultural references it formulates, see Greenblatt (1983, 1-29). Here a reading of a design by Albrecht Dürer provides the discursive framework for interpretations of Spenser, Sidney, and Shakespeare.

Greenblatt, the colonists found themselves in a potentially dangerous situation because they had become dependent upon the native peoples for food supplies and, at one and the same time, were engaged in a project of establishing colonial domination over the area and its inhabitants. Most prominent among the tactics deemed necessary for colonial hegemony was the acceptance by the native population of the superiority of the European Christian God. The *Report* is of particular interest because Harriot, who was familiar with some of the Algonquin language, took special pains to record the crisis of belief, the anxious speculations among the tribes. Such critical deliberations involve not only the acceptance of the new Christian divinity, but also a consideration of the spellbinding power of retribution which seemed to emanate from the colonists's God. More precisely, Harriot records the attempts to explain the mysterious deaths (presumably caused by the spread of measles, smallpox and other diseases brought by the English) which struck down the native populations. Some medicine men, he writes, believed "those that were immediately to come after us [the first English colonists], they imaged to be in the air, yet invisible and without bodies, and that they by our entreaty and for the love of us did make the people to die ... by shooting invisible bullets into them" (36). What is compelling about this passage, in Greenblatt's view, is that Harriot has recorded the potentially subversive voices of the Indians, and, more importantly, that these voices elaborate an "explanation" unsettlingly close to the scientific theories which will displace moral or religious accounts of disease and death. This apparent subversion of one's own authority ultimately proves to be a tactic for the vigilant elaboration of the authority. In Greenblatt's words, "English power in the first Virginia colony *depends* upon the registering and even the production of potentially unsettling perspectives" (37). But how does the construction of colonial hegemony in Virginia illuminate Shakespeare's plays? In the subsequent analyses of the *Henry IV* plays and *Henry V* Greenblatt argues that Harriot's strategies find expression in Hal's successful production and reproduction of his authority as prince and king. His carousing in *Henry IV* results less from youthful exuberance than from the conscious tactics of a skillful counterfeiter who mimics and studies tavern life in order to dominate it. Thus what Greenblatt lays bare are the similarities of the discursive systems in the texts of Harriot and Shakespeare; both seem to subvert constituted authority, but end up utilizing that subversion in the construction and legitimation of a more encompassing system of power.

This is perhaps the place to say something about new historicism and the narratives which it has elaborated. It is by now widely recognized that new historicism represents a disenchantment with the linguistic paradigms of structuralism and post-structuralism, and is motivated by a desire to rethink

the relationship between the literary text and history.[2] Such a re-engagement with history, however, ought not to suggest that new historicism has turned away from the literary theory and philosophy of the past three decades. Far from it. Post-structuralist thought, and in particular Foucauldian analyses of power and the constitution of authority, provide the conceptual framework for much new-historicist writing. Judith Newton has aptly summed up the convergence of post-structuralism and new historicism in the following way:

> Those practicing "new historicism," we are told, generally assume there is no transhistorical or universal human essence and that human subjectivity is constructed by cultural codes with position and limit all of us in various and divided ways. They assume that there is no "objectivity," that we experience the "world" in language, and that all our representations of the world, our readings of texts and of the past, are informed by our own historical positions, by the values and politics which are rooted in them. They assume, finally, that representation "makes things happen" by "shaping human consciousness" and that, as forces acting in history various forms of representation ought to be read in relation to each other and in relation to non-discursive "texts" like "events." (88-89)

Indeed, the last sentence in this passage powerfully recalls the narrative strategy of *Shakespearean Negotiations*: as I have already noted, each of Greenblatt's analyses of Shakespeare takes the reader through an extended discussion of a social or cultural text before examining the plays. Because it has been allotted narrative priority, the "non-literary" text appears to set terms for the reading and decipherment of the "literary" text. Edward Pechter has forcefully argued that Greenblatt's analyses end up privileging the cultural text over the play and its dramatic functions; as he writes, "dramatic impressions are subordinated to and controlled by facts of social history that seem to stand behind them" (294). Accordingly, the uniquely dramatic aspects of Shakespeare's plays are subsumed within the discursive *episteme* which they share with other Elizabethan and Jacobean textual productions.

Finally, it is striking that Greenblatt's formulation of textual reception seems to downplay the reader's engagement with the social energy encoded in the text. In his view the reader remains curiously detached: "we find 'subversive' in the past precisely those things that are *not* subversive to ourselves, that pose no threat to the order by which we live and allocate resources" (39). To be sure, it is unquestionably true that we are little concerned with networks of power in Tudor absolutism, and it is also true that we ought to be extremely cautious about constructing an evolutionist historicism which sees in the past simply the prehistory of the present. But

2 See Jean Howard's comments in her review of Jonathan Goldberg.

is it true that the voices of the colonized and the construction of colonial power do not put us in a state of unease? Does the appropriation of the gestures and language of one social class or group by another for the purposes of domination and control not touch on our own deeply felt anxieties? To my mind, Greenblatt's formulation might be qualified and modified by juxtaposing it to a famous comment which Walter Benjamin made in his "Theses on History." "To articulate the past historically...," Benjamin writes, "means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (255). Thus our own anxieties, our own moments of danger, may condition the ways in which we negotiate our readings of past texts. Still, no one who reads *Shakespearean Negotiations* can fail to be challenged, provoked and delighted by Greenblatt's interpretations. It is an immensely rewarding book about a theatre which compels, and will continue to compel, our attention.

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The Dynamics of Power: A Review of Heather Dubrow's *Captive Victors*

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Heather Dubrow's study of Shakespeare's narrative poems and sonnets, *Captive Victors*, presents the characters in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* and the speaker of the sonnets as "captive victors," at once victorious and victimized.[1] As the title suggests, Dubrow is among those scholars who recently have been investigating the dynamics of power in English Renaissance literature, but *Captive Victors* is less concerned with the coercive authority of political and social institutions than with love and language as exercises in domination, and less interested in efforts to subvert authority and to contain subversion than in the ambiguities of power and vulnerability within personal relationships and the individual psyche. In *Captive Victors,* Venus emerges not primarily as a lusty sensualist nor as a symbolic representation of eros, but as a subtle characterization of a woman who associates love with control and mastery. The speaker of the sonnets appears not as the generous, large-souled, and painfully honest lover that C.L. Barber described some thirty years ago, but as a figure for the 90's: a man preoccupied with power, deceiving and deceived. Just as Dubrow demonstrates how characters use language to dominate others, she also shows how they are entrapped by their own deceptive rhetoric. In the sonnets, the speaker flatters his young friend who is "fond on praise" (84:14) and morally compromises himself by his evasion and duplicity. In her efforts to seduce Adonis, Venus renames the world around her, trying to transform reality to suit her purposes, and is caught in the house of mirrors she has built, unable to see accurately either Adonis or the consequences of her own actions.

Entrapment by the language that empowers is as evident in victims as in aggressors. Adonis' aphoristic truisms protect him from Venus' attacks, but they also demonstrate his foolish reliance on conventional pieties in a world of random violence. Similarly, Lucrece's sententious generalizations are both assertions of value and self-worth and a symptom of dangerous belief in

1 Dubrow, Heather. *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1987.

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