

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SHAKESPEARE'S GIFTS:
SELF-FASHIONING, AUTHORISING,
STEPHEN GREENBLATT

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Arranging Shakespeare's Gifts

The career of Stephen Greenblatt, in the eyes of many of his devotees, took something of an odd turn in the first years of the twenty-first century: long heralded as the doyen of New Historicism, Greenblatt's work at this time seemed to signal a turn away from the movement he had founded three decades ago. In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, published in 2002, the usual hallmarks of New Historicist method remain on show—the seemingly unrelated historical anecdote, the wide ranging selections of non-literary texts for the purpose of cultural comparison, and self-reflexive commentary on the method of analysis being employed. Yet in these moments of self-reflexivity in *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt attests to developing a growing dissatisfaction with the breed of cultural materialism for which he has become most well known, and the result of this dissatisfaction is that the book may possess the hallmarks of the New Historicist method, but they are far from abundant. It seems to me that *Hamlet in Purgatory* could be said to represent Greenblatt's own foray into what we may call a more standard literary history; shall we say, two parts Tillyard to only one part of the Greenblatt with which we had grown accustomed since the halcyon days of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and *Shakespearean Negotiations*, for example. In *Will in the World*, published in 2004, his rejection of New Historicism seemed all but complete, as Greenblatt turned his hand to literary biography, attempting of all things to trace the life of the Bard as it finds expression in his play texts.

Rather than taking it as read that these books represent a turn away from the movement he founded, I want to revisit in some detail

Greenblatt's first major work, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980a), to suggest that this earlier foundational text puts into place an arrangement that defers, yet ultimately demands, a return. This arrangement is what we will be calling Shakespeare's gifts. In the contours of the construction of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, I suggest, we can identify the signature of an exchange that is in this book only entered into by Greenblatt, but which remains by book's end as yet unsettled. My argument is that in *Hamlet in Purgatory* and *Will in the World* we can see at last an attempt by Greenblatt to render this account complete, to repay a debt accumulated by virtue of having presented *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* as the receipt of a number of gifts. In other words, rather than view these two books as Greenblatt's turn away from New Historicism, we can locate them as delivering on a promissory note inscribed in the work that kick-started the movement, and without which there would have been scarcely a movement at all.

It is worth noting that in "The Touch of the Real"—in which some of the material used in *Hamlet in Purgatory* was initially presented—Greenblatt includes a list of examples of his own use of the method known as "thick description" in readings of Shakespearean texts. The significant feature of this list is that it fails to include his reading of *Othello* in terms of the Christian doctrine of sexuality via a story told by Peter Martyr in 1525, the reading on which the final chapter of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* hinges. It would be fair to say that this list of examples demands from the reader a sense of their familiarity with the texts in question. Indeed, Greenblatt's argument in this essay is that great works of literature risk becoming so familiar to their readers that they cease to be able to offer what the Russian formalists called "estrangement." In the context of his own argument, Greenblatt's list performs in itself a peculiar form of estrangement. Readers of Greenblatt's work would know *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* only too well: it was in this work that he provided the first complete presentation of the method he was at that time calling "a poetics of culture" modelled on Clifford Geertz's anthropological model for thick description (1980a, 4-5). Failing to include his own manifesto document in his list of examples of the use of thick description, Greenblatt does not therefore commit an act of erasure; rather, he demands that it be remembered after the manner of a haunting, making it strange once again. In this sense, I suggest that the book—that is, its absence in this list—functions rather like the return of Hamlet's father, as a reminder of a promise that the son has made, as Greenblatt describes the role of the Ghost in this essay and, later, in *Hamlet in Purgatory*. By producing his own ghost, Greenblatt invites us

to consider if there is also an absent promise bound up in this list. By failing to list the foundation text here, I suggest, Greenblatt positions “The Touch of the Real” at the moment of bearing witness to the revenant, a forgotten figure to whom the promissory note has already been inscribed from the beginning.

This figure is, of course, Shakespeare, whose name has always served as guarantor for the success of the New Historicist enterprise. With this comment, I indicate that I do not by this name simply refer to the historical personage to whom we attribute, rightly or wrongly, the authorship of a collection of most enduring play texts. I refer principally to that global institution within literary criticism and scholarship that devotes itself to these play texts and to securing the authority of the name of Shakespeare. In what follows, I will in fact claim that Greenblatt’s calculated acceptance of Shakespeare’s gifts, and his eventual repayment of the associated debt, operates within the terms of this distinction, addressing itself at once to both the institution that secures the name of Shakespeare *and* the shadowy figure cloaked by history, but whose writings serve as ultimate testamur.

First Gift: Self-Fashioning

Let us return to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, then, and Shakespeare’s gifts. From the title, it should be apparent that I will be discussing three gifts in particular: a concept of self-fashioning, an authorising moment, and the making of Stephen Greenblatt’s name. To show how these come to Greenblatt in the form of gifts, it will be necessary first to reflect on the structure of his analysis of Renaissance self-fashioning. He divides his six chapters in this book into two key triads, structuring both this division and the internal organisation of these triads around a “perception of two radical antitheses, each of which gives way to a complex third term in which the opposition is reiterated and transformed” (Greenblatt 1980a, 8). These triads are no simple arbitrary principle of organisation, as if to say that one or two exemplary figures is insufficient to make a case for a specific cultural phenomenon, but three establishes a pattern irrefutably. Instead, the triads function in this book with the full rhetorical force of a syllogistic formulation: they argue the case for a third term even as they present this third term as the logical outcome of two preceding terms, and we note here that Greenblatt indeed uses the phrase “third term” quite deliberately in his description of the triadic structure of his book. For this reason, I will argue that the triad functions in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* precisely as a control mechanism—a phrase I use deliberately,

for reasons that will soon become evident—that will enable Greenblatt to establish mastery over the Renaissance figures and texts he presents. Yet the capacity for the triad to function in this controlling fashion is concealed by virtue of what seems to be the more immediate hermeneutic function it serves: to explain Renaissance self-fashioning directly. In pursuit of an understanding of Renaissance self-fashioning, then, the structure of the book leads Greenblatt inevitably, it seems, to the figure whose name completes his book's title—from More to Shakespeare—and it is in this dynamic that the first gift is fashioned, I suggest.

The first chapter depicts the life of Thomas More as having been fashioned in response to a conflict between his public and private selves. In *Utopia*, More fictionalises these two sides of himself, only to realise that his internal conflict can only be quieted through cancellation of his selves, that is, through denial of selfhood *per se*. In the next chapter, Greenblatt explores the way in which the concept of selfhood was being exposed on the other side of the religious tumult in which More was embroiled. The central figure is William Tyndale, but enough is said about Lollards like Sir John Oldcastle and William Thorpe, and of the interrogation of James Bainham, to make this chapter a more wide ranging study of the social and psychological influences on Protestant reform in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The availability of Biblical tracts and religious conduct manuals in print gave vent to the transition from one mode of interiority to another—from an inwardness that failed to express itself against the institutional powers it opposed, to one that could be exteriorised and shared—as if the printed word provided an exact correlation between the Word of God and an internalisation of the Christian way of life. Greenblatt selected his protagonists well in these first two chapters. More and Tyndale are positioned in Reformation politics as direct opponents, and Bainham is a crucial figure in the midst of this opposition, as a target of More's interrogations. Yet their opposition is construed not only in terms of preferment at the court of Henry VIII, nor as the establishment of a religious or institutional doctrine. The conflict between More and Tyndale hinges on the realisation to which each has arrived that selfhood is something that can be fashioned, and there is great power to be had in determining the principal mode of self-fashioning at a time when church and state are being exposed as the products of imaginary forms of control.

The third chapter turns to Thomas Wyatt's poetry, concentrating on his translation of the penitential psalms, but within the context of Wyatt's career under Henry's reign. These poems are seen here as possessing a dual purpose, addressing both the history of the transmission of the

psalms—to which end the poems function as works of literary skill—and the requirements of the court—to which end the poems convey flair for diplomacy. Within this duality the poems are capable of effecting what Greenblatt calls, after Louis Althusser, an “internal distance, this gap between discourse and intention” (1980a, 153). Internal distance is what enables literary texts to “engage in complex reflections upon the system of values that has generated them” (156). Yet Wyatt is personally incapable of engaging in complex reflections of this kind because he lacks a stable, external point of reference. More and Tyndale had each imagined a secure position from which to cast doubt on selfhood—for More it was absorption in the Church; for Tyndale it was absorption in the Word of God—yet their words lacked the capacity for internal distance. Conversely, the secular, sexual power governing the “will to domination” at the court provides Wyatt with no secure point on which to focus his reflections. The first triad is thus constituted in the antithesis of More and Tyndale, both of whom are opposite yet participate jointly in a program of casting selfhood into doubt, and the figure of a third, Wyatt, who is able to achieve internal distance in the mode of a literary diplomacy that enables preferment at the court even as it engages in complex reflections upon the same system.

The second triad begins with an examination of why the Knight of Temperance should prove to be anything but temperate in his dealings with the Bower of Bliss in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Greenblatt argues that under Elizabeth a pattern emerged of transforming power relations into erotic relations, as a proof of Freud’s general claim that civilization behaves toward sexuality in the same manner “as a people or stratum of its population does which has subjected another one to its exploitation” (1980a, 173). Spenser’s Knight thus represents the poet’s complicity in the broader pattern of subjection. In the fifth chapter, Greenblatt turns the argument around in relation to Christopher Marlowe’s plays, explaining that his characters remain bound at all times by a theatrical identity that must be reiterated if it is to endure beyond the void of the final curtain. Their lack of freedom reflects Marx’s claim that agency only ever exists “under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past” (Greenblatt 1980a, 209). Because Marlowe’s characters have no existence beyond the play, the playwright is able to use them to flaunt and subvert received orthodoxies under the guise of absolute play. Thus, a second general antithesis is presented: Spenser’s poetry is complicitous while Marlowe’s drama is subversive. In this sense, Greenblatt is able to open his final chapter with the claim that these two figures are, “from the perspective of this study, mighty opposites,

poised in antagonism as radical as that of More and Tyndale in the 1530s" (1980a, 222). Yet out of this antithesis, he will identify the terms for a radical third figure, which brings us at last to Shakespeare and, perhaps more specifically, to *Othello*.

Spenser and Marlowe share common ground, according to Greenblatt, in the ability of their chief protagonists to seem as much like their opposite as themselves. In the last chapter, he calls the mode of self-fashioning that manipulates this ability *improvisation*, which he finds centred in Iago. Improvisation is described as opportunistic manipulation of that which seems fixed and established, which in the case of Iago and Othello is "the centuries-old Christian doctrine of sexuality" (Greenblatt 1980a, 246). Iago's manipulation of the relation in which both he and Othello stand to this doctrine is seen by Greenblatt as a typically Renaissance version of what Lacan said in his critique of Freud about "the dependence of even the innermost self upon a language that is always necessarily given from without and upon representation before an audience" (1980a, 245). Iago depends utterly upon this same language to gain access to Othello, and in so doing, he must reproduce it in himself. The power of the improviser is this capacity to internalise *and* to manipulate that which is necessarily given from without. As we saw in the fifth chapter, this was a power that was lacking in Marlowe's characters. Indeed, in the economy of Greenblatt's triads, Iago's improvisation upon Othello represents a doubly dialectical achievement, in so far as it embodies and transforms the figures portrayed in all of the other five chapters. Iago works upon Othello, whose complicity mirrors Spenser's Knight and whose dependence mirrors Marlowe's characters, and Iago's capacity to inhabit and manipulate the same language realises the internal distance approached by Wyatt, who in turn we already saw embodying and transforming the antithesis found in the pairing of More and Tyndale.

The dialectical economy of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* thus ultimately fixes Iago, and not necessarily Shakespeare, as its logical synthesis. A point that seems to me to have been previously overlooked by commentators on this book is that this final chapter is indeed concerned primarily with Iago's self-fashioning, and Greenblatt is compelled only to offer several passing references to that near invisible figure who bears the name of the playwright, if anything, so as to dispel the notion that Iago and Shakespeare could be said to be isomorphous. Shakespeare's anonymity at this point constitutes a defining parameter of what I am calling the first of his gifts. What we see in Iago is the capacity of a *literary creation* to present Renaissance self-fashioning as a fundamental

character trait and a pivotal plot device. Greenblatt describes self-fashioning as the Renaissance version of what Geertz had called the control mechanisms that constitute a culture. Iago represents the ability, possessed by his author, to thematise these control mechanisms so as to contain them within the confines of the stage. Marlowe alone had previously come closest to tackling this issue of representing an external reality within such confines, and Wyatt alone had previously come closest to being able to establish the internal distance within the text to enable reflection upon its outer condition from within. Iago represents the successful synthesis of these ultimately failed positions, yet the absence of the author shows us that success hinges on a second degree of distance, which I shall be discussing in more detail. The successful improvisation must in any case be presented in the form of a gift, since the improvisation forces the author to recede from the text altogether. Shakespeare's first gift is thus the realisation of the dialectical achievement that Greenblatt seeks as the very subject of his book: Renaissance self-fashioning. Yet the achievement demands that the author of this model of self-fashioning be allowed to recede into relative anonymity, as if the achievement were wholly generated within the text itself. By accepting the gift, however begrudgingly, Greenblatt must therefore also allow Shakespeare to remain anonymous.

Second Gift: Authorising

Ethnographer James Clifford wrote a short but generous critique of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* as part of an essay on ethnographic self-fashioning in 1986. In this critique, he describes a double manner by which ethnographic discourse, including Greenblatt's version of it, operates: "Though it portrays other selves as culturally constituted, it also fashions an identity authorised to represent, interpret, even to believe—but always with some irony—the truths of discrepant worlds" (Clifford 1986, 142). The key term here is "authorised," which I want to discuss in terms of the establishment of a field of authority but also in a somewhat archaic sense of establishing an individual as the author of a work. Having looked at the structure of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* in some detail, I want to return to a point made prior to this analysis—that the structures it presents constitute Greenblatt's own control mechanisms. As we have seen, the hermeneutic function of the two triads serves to establish Shakespeare as the ultimate improviser, the quintessential mode of operation for Renaissance self-fashioning, which demands that his name is withdrawn. I will argue in what follows that the adoption of a

structure that enables this hermeneutic function also enables Greenblatt to establish mastery over his Renaissance materials and that this represents nothing less than his own highly successful improvisation. I contend that the means by which Greenblatt establishes authority and authorship, in the double manner identified by Clifford, come to him in the form of the second of Shakespeare's gifts.

Four of the six chapters of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* had previously been published as separate essays, although each underwent some form of alteration in preparation of the final manuscript. The most substantive of these alterations can be situated in the first chapter. "More, Role-Playing and *Utopia*" had previously appeared in *The Yale Review* in 1978 and is then reproduced almost verbatim as the first half of the first chapter of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*; however, five full pages of new material are inserted in the middle of the previously published block of text. The inserted text deals with Hans Holbein's *Ambassadors*, a painting that also adorns the front cover of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Greenblatt discusses this piece in order to provide graphic insight into the estrangement and richness of More's art, and in so doing relies on a contention that More and Holbein possessed a special bond of understanding, which in turn enabled Holbein to produce such magnificent and intimate portraits of More and his family. This must lead us to wonder why Greenblatt chose *The Ambassadors* to illustrate this special bond rather than the portraits that are the ultimate expression of this bond. I suggest that the choice is more strategic in terms of the broader project of which the chapter on More is merely the first component.

In describing Holbein's masterpiece, Greenblatt points out that in order to perceive all of the symbols used to characterise the two main figures, we are required to approach the canvas "with such myopic closeness that the whole gives way to a mass of individual details" (1980a, 19), yet in order to give true resolution to a death's-head skull stretched across the foreground of the painting, we must reposition our gaze to the side, throwing all else out of perspective "in order to bring into perspective what our usual mode of perception cannot comprehend" (19). The anamorphic image represents the end of conventional perspective, and the symbol of death that is resolved in the anamorphosis represents the cancellation of the self, both of which are aspects of More's *Utopia* in Greenblatt's own reading of the text. Yet Greenblatt's description of the demands placed on the viewer by Holbein's anamorphic art could also just as easily be applied to the structure of his own readings in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Each chapter engages in a myopic

reading of a key passage of text, but then each reading is situated in relation to the others on the basis of *perception* of a radical antithesis and its resolution, a process that involves relocating our gaze and viewing the three terms that occupy each triad together.

This possibility suggests that in addition to the resemblance Greenblatt establishes between More and Holbein, he also asserts a strategic resemblance between these two *and himself*. He is not only the observer of Renaissance texts, identifying antitheses or perceiving their resolution from this side of history; he is the producer of the text that possesses this anamorphic capacity, with *Utopia* as an early literary precursor and *The Ambassadors* as an early graphic example. Yet this is clearly not sufficient, for More is just the starting point. The economy of the two triads will convey to us the idea that if Greenblatt is indeed a latter day More, then he will also have his Tyndale, Wyatt, and so on. With the insertion of the material on Holbein, I think, Greenblatt is simply bringing to the reader's attention the suggestion that the dialectical logic according to which he will be organising his two triads is in fact already present as a method of re-orienting the gaze in Renaissance artistic practice. The insertion of the Holbein material is necessary purely from the standpoint of the hermeneutic function of the triadic structure: it aids in concealing Greenblatt's controlling hand, and his use of the word "perception" plays its part by preparing the reader to imagine Greenblatt as observer rather than as producer.

Yet the text clearly *is* produced in such a way as to make its author recede from the text into the observer position. What the text achieves is thus no longer anamorphosis but a form of internal distance, the very goal toward which the Renaissance figures in question all strive. I would go one step further and suggest that this internal distance is achieved precisely through the manipulation of that which seems fixed and established. In this sense, Greenblatt's authority and authorship are established in a process that sees him aligned more with Iago, the master improviser than with More, the anamorphic artist. The fact that Greenblatt alters his own previously published material to make it fit into the dialectical structure of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* is one index of his capacity for an opportunistic use of that which seems fixed and established. If anything, though, such a practice merely establishes Greenblatt's credentials for conscientious revision. To find further evidence of Greenblatt's credentials as master improviser, I suggest we turn our attention once more to the manner in which the two triads are organised.

The hermeneutic function served by these triads provides a sense to the reader that these historical figures occupy their specific

interrelationships as an historical fact: we might perceive their radical antitheses and resolutions through two third terms along with the observer Greenblatt, but these antitheses and resolutions emerge directly within what we are calling Renaissance self-fashioning. Yet we might do well to recall here the terms by which these antitheses and resolutions are presented to the reader. The first antithesis is of course an historical fact: More and Tyndale *were* in direct conflict. The third term by which this first antithesis is resolved, however, is Wyatt, to be sure, but we are given to identify the potential for resolution here through Althusser's term, "internal distance". The fact that the first antithesis is identified on the basis of a direct historical relation between the two figures in question means that it is easy to overlook the role played by the work of a far more recent theorist in providing the terms for resolving the antithesis. Theory takes a far more prominent and obvious role in the organisation of the second triad: Freud's work enables Greenblatt to emphasise inwardness; Marxist theory enables Greenblatt to emphasise that which is given from without; and Lacanian ideas represent the synthesis of these two positions, after a manner, by emphasising the dependence of the innermost self on that which is given from without. The role of theory in the last four chapters of the book is thus to position the figures whose work is described in these terms within the contours of an arrangement that we are supposed to merely perceive as such. It can do this, moreover, because the theory in question can be presented according to the logic of the same arrangement: Freud and Marx are situated as radically antithetical on the basis of an emphasis by the former on inwardness and by the latter on exteriority; Lacan is identified as a third term that resolves this antithesis; and Althusser's internal distance overarches the second triad, just as it might be more generally observed that Althusser's theoretical project is an attempted synthesis of Marxism with the Lacanian return to Freud.

The organisation of the theoretical materials and, through them, the Renaissance figures that remain the historical focus of Greenblatt's study are, in this way, demonstrative of a mechanism of control being put into effect. The question is: what kind of mechanism? In the first instance, I described the organisation of the six figures in the book as adhering to the hermeneutic function of the historical study; but I think the use of the theoretical materials to shape our understanding of the relationships between these figures might be better described, perhaps, as heuristic rather than hermeneutic in fashion. This to say the interpretations of historical materials are driven as much by the lens through which they are viewed as they are by the historical record itself. This is, to be sure, a

fundamental component of the method used by Greenblatt: “it is everywhere evident in this book that the questions I ask of my material and indeed the very nature of this material are shaped by the questions I ask of myself” (1980a, 5). New Historicism or the poetics of culture—call it as you will—in this sense is presented as a mode of thick description, which seeks to understand that to which it can gain no direct access, and which compensates for the lack of access by focusing on descriptive, if not explanatory, adequacy. By filtering all description through a series of theoretical models, Greenblatt credentials himself, not only as master of the Renaissance materials he seeks to understand, but also of those theoretical materials in question. It is as if everything to hand—the Renaissance texts, the lives of their authors, Greenblatt’s own previous published material, and the works of the major theorists—is amenable to the art of the master improviser on *this* side of history.

Yet we must not forget that improvisation is more than bricolage or the capacity to craft clever links between the component parts of the text. Improvisation as described in Greenblatt’s reading of *Othello* requires that the improviser will also submit fully to the materials from which the improvisation is produced. We gain glimpses of this, I believe, in some more subtle—and, dare I say, seemingly unnecessary—editorial changes made by Greenblatt in revising existing material for the book. The final chapter was first published as “Improvisation and Power” in an English Institute collection edited by Edward Said in 1978. In this previously published version, we find the terms “ecstatic” and “passionate” used in descriptions of Othello’s relationship with Desdemona: there is the “exquisite moment of the lovers’ ecstatic reunion on Cyprus” (1978, 76); we are told that Othello welcomes the moment with a “passionate greeting” (1978, 77); and finally, we are reminded that the “lover’s passionate reunion” produces a moving ambivalence in the experience “of the ecstatic moment itself” (1978, 79). In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, this distribution of terms is amended by the removal of “ecstatic” from the first sentence and the alteration of “passionate greeting” to read “ecstatic words” in the second (1980a, 240-41). Is it necessary to have made such changes? Closer examination of the distribution of these adjectives may bear out the necessity: in the initial version, the lovers’ reunion is at first described as “ecstatic” and then “passionate,” terms that are not strictly synonymous, the former pertaining more directly to an intense inner access to emotions while the latter refers more precisely to the representation or the expression of such emotion; in the later version, the reunion alone is passionate, whereas Othello’s words and *his* experience of the moment are ecstatic, projecting inwardly the words that he uses to

describe emotions that should come from within.

Such myopic attention to the distribution of adjectives in his own work is not simply a case of pedantry on the part of Greenblatt. The corrections involved here attest to the author's awareness that in order to adequately convey the idea of the "dependence of even the innermost self upon a language that is always necessarily given from without and upon representation before an audience," he must use the right adjectives to describe inwardness and exteriority in the expression of joy. In so doing, he shows himself to be dependent on the language of his readers in order for his calculations to be correct, else the improvisation will fail. I think it is no coincidence, then, that hereafter on several occasions—in *Shakespearean Negotiations* and "The Touch of the Real," for example—Greenblatt openly describes his own reading practices as "passionate" engagements with historically removed texts, suggesting a level of intimacy and collapsing the historical distance to the texts, but also indicative of a sense that these engagements are never uncontrolled or wholly self-gratifying, as is the case with ecstasy. Thus, Greenblatt's engagements with Renaissance texts, including his reading of *Othello*, are akin to Iago's improvisation to the extent that both are prepared to let words be words, rather than an abyss into which selfhood collapses hopelessly. This is a guarantee of authorial control and of an authority to represent Renaissance texts according to these mechanisms. The truth of Clifford's assessment of ethnographic self-fashioning holds good, then, in so far as Greenblatt's text does indeed *authorise* itself, although it stops short, perhaps, of the claim that what is authorised here is an identity in the fullest sense of that term. Indeed, in Greenblatt's "literary variant," as Clifford calls it, identity is already in question as the very subject of investigation in a study of "self-fashioning," although I will come back to this issue in the next section.

In terms of what I am calling Shakespeare's gifts, the point here is that Greenblatt's mode of operation, as it reveals itself through the text, is very much akin to the mode of self-fashioning that he identifies in Iago's manipulations of language, doctrine, people, selfhood writ large, and so on. If Greenblatt models his own text on the work of any one of those six principal figures he describes, then, it is surely Iago, but this is also to admit that his text is not modelled on the work of Shakespeare in the most direct sense of such a relation. This is also not to suggest that Greenblatt would not credential himself as the modern critical version of Shakespeare if such a thing were possible, but then this is the point Greenblatt makes in the final two pages of the last chapter: such a thing cannot be possible. Iago appears to us in *Othello* as the consummate

example of the improviser but this tells us nothing about Shakespeare except that he clearly knew how to present such an example within the text. For Iago's status as consummate improviser to be upheld, of course, he must appear to us as the author of his own situation, which is to say that the Shakespearean text will authorise itself but will yet again allow its author to recede from that role to all intents and purposes. Greenblatt's improvisational text thus demurs at the end, rather than align itself fully with this shadowy figure on the other side of *Othello*. Shakespeare's second gift is nothing less, then, than the improvisational text modelled on Iago's improvisation, through which the text of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* asserts its own authority, even if it does so at the risk of compromising the kind of authorised identity to which Clifford refers.

Third Gift: Stephen Greenblatt

Having worked in some detail through the first two gifts, much of the groundwork for a description of the third gift has been done. This means that we can move expeditiously through the last section, although it will be important to remember that the third gift is not simply a direct extension of the first two. I also think it may be necessary to point out in advance of this last section, following the previous discussion of the organisation of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, that it will not be my intention to show that this third gift emerges logically as a third term that resolves any antithesis perceived in the first two. Instead, the goal will be to show that this third gift is what will guarantee in some sense that the first two gifts remain anonymous. I have argued that these first two gifts are so difficult to recognise in such terms because they only function as gifts by virtue of the need for the giver to remain anonymous. The third gift is thus seen here as what will guarantee the first two gifts are received. Since receipt of the gift demands anonymity on the part of the giver, of course, there is no expectation that the debt accrued on receipt of the gift can ever be directly repaid. This third gift will, however, establish the conditions for repayment of the debt accrued through receipt of all three.

I have argued that the giver of these gifts is supposed to remain anonymous, and yet the name of Shakespeare is impossible to deny. It has long since entered into common usage as a pronominal substitute for all of the works which bear this name as their signature, but also as the name for the vast archive of works that have been written on the subject of these texts. In terms of the somewhat vulgar expression, to study or teach any of these texts is quite simply to be "doing Shakespeare" and that is all that

needs to be said on the matter to locate one's work within an established field. The name asserts itself, then, at the very point at which it is intended to recede. On the cover of the book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, then, we see three proper names: More, Shakespeare, and Stephen Greenblatt. Of these, one stands apart as the name for a broad, discursive field in which one simply *does* what is named. In other words, Greenblatt is unable, ultimately, to allow the name of Shakespeare to recede fully, as it is clearly the better career move to include his name on the cover of the book—to situate the book within the field that bears this name—rather than to adopt what may be a more technically accurate subtitle: from More to Iago. With this comment we drift toward the *raison d'etre* of the improviser, which is nothing less than self-interest, even when it is under the sway of a self-fashioning that by definition brings selfhood into question.

Importantly, Greenblatt's discussion of Iago's improvisational strategy explicitly covers this same territory. It is Iago, after all, who voices those two abysmal phrases—"Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago" (Greenblatt 1980a, 235) and "I am not what I am" (236, 238)—which affirm for Greenblatt the suggestion that "even self-interest, whose transcendental guarantee is the divine 'I am what I am,' is a mask" (236). Throughout *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Greenblatt relies at various times on being able to assert himself in the form of the first-person pronoun. He relates personal anecdotes, conveys opinions and impressions, and adopts explicit positions on a number of critical issues. His reading of Iago's masking of the nominative singular pronoun thus rebounds in some measure on his own. In the brief epilogue that follows this discussion of Iago, it is quite significant that the imposition of the "I" becomes even more evident—we might say desperate—than at any other moment in the book. In only two pages, Greenblatt uses the singular pronoun no less than sixty-nine times, a profusion that sounds what Lloyd Davis has called "a last conceptual grasp for self-presence" (1993, 17). The anecdote that provides him with the occasion to make this bid for self-presence is also telling: he recounts his refusal to accede to another man's request to hear him repeat the phrase "I want to die" (Greenblatt 1980a, 255). His bid at the end to cling to self-presence forces Greenblatt to put to one side—if not altogether to contradict—the improvisational credo in which even self-interest is shown to be a mask, such that he is unable to bring himself to utter the phrase that bespeaks the annihilation of self. Yet in the first of Iago's abysmal phrases—"Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago"—the path of least resistance against the spiral into absolute self-cancellation, which begins in the book with More, is

provided: the proper name. While the “I” of identity is exposed here as a signifier in want of a stable point of reference, the presence of the proper name can function like a potent stopgap measure to halt the descent into the abyss.

In the preceding section of this essay, we looked at the possibility that Greenblatt inserts the Holbein material to establish the distance between his own authorial enterprise and that of the author of *Utopia*. Perhaps Greenblatt could simply have written, in an echo of Iago, “Were I More, I would not be Greenblatt.” Yet Greenblatt shows us in the epilogue why such a phrase would be impossible to produce, because he clings to self-presence. I suggest that by voicing a desire to maintain the illusion that he is the principal maker of his own identity, Greenblatt is also resisting the recession of the self behind the proper name. Proper names, note, do not represent a statement of identity; rather they serve to fix meaning. Moreover, as Michel Foucault has taught us, within institutions constructed around the logic of the archive, proper names take on the status of the “author-function” (1977, 123). The corpus of texts bearing the name Shakespeare and the amalgam of practices carried out under the auspices of securing that name testify to the enduring power of this author-function. By publishing a book that has as its final chapter a reading of *Othello*, Greenblatt at once calls upon the authority of that author-function and imprints his own name into the same archive. By presenting his own name alongside Shakespeare’s on the cover of this book, whatever else he might say about his own identity, Greenblatt fixes the meaning of his own proper name in ways that cannot be undone by repeating the phrase “I” over and over in any other context.

This, then, is the futility of this last conceptual grasp for self-presence in the final pages of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, but also explains its necessity. Greenblatt requires the acquisition of an authority to represent Iago’s improvisation, even with a hint of irony, as Clifford observed. To be authorised in this way, Greenblatt’s name must be capable of sitting alongside or occupying the same space as that of the author of *Othello*, even as the aim of his own improvisational strategy is to establish authority via a series of mechanisms of control that work by virtue of enabling the author’s own hand to seem to recede into the background. For Greenblatt’s name to gain such purchase at the moment it is forced to the surface, that is, in occupying the place of the author-function, it must also position itself alongside Shakespeare’s name, rather than be allowed to seem to gain its authority solely by virtue of its place within the larger archive, which also bears the name of Shakespeare. This is where I think Greenblatt stands to gain a secondary guarantee of authority from the last

few pages of the book, beginning with a couple of pages worth of description of Shakespeare's own relative anonymity and then, in the last two pages, the declaration of self-presence to counteract Shakespeare's anonymity. Greenblatt's brief anecdote thus situates itself in this book as a counterpoint to the relative absence of the figure whose name on the cover of the book threatens to place Greenblatt's own name into a subordinate role. In short, the anecdote enables Greenblatt to place his own name in a site of authorship, safe in the knowledge that his own improvisational strategy has ensured that the ghost of Shakespeare will fail to appear.

Account Rendered

I would hope it is now possible to bring the discussion of the three gifts to a suitable conclusion. In this description of what I have called Shakespeare's third gift, I hope to have spelled out in brief, at least, the condition of debt as it emerges in the methods used by Greenblatt to authorise, or to establish authority in and around, the text of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. The third gift is quite simply the establishment of Greenblatt's name in the context of what Foucault describes as the author-function, which is only achieved by forcing Shakespeare's proper name to appear in the foreground, even as Shakespeare, the historical figure, is forced into relative anonymity. The acceptance of these gifts carries with it, then, a sense of the inevitable return of Shakespeare, not simply as the name for what one does when one is also doing New Historicism, shall we say. The phenomenal success of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* would have ensured that the sense of debt that it generates for its author will have been forced home acutely. In closing, I want to map—in albeit the most cursory fashion—the signs of this debt coming ever more insistently to the fore throughout Greenblatt's subsequent research. In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, for example, he tries to come to terms with how Elizabethan circuits of power and cultural production give to Shakespeare's writings their initial cultural importance. There is thus an underlying project here of asserting an ongoing cultural significance in Shakespeare's writings, yet Shakespeare is still absent to some extent in that this enduring importance is seen as receiving its initial guarantee from the condition of their circulation within a specific milieu. In both *Learning to Curse* and *Marvellous Possessions*, Shakespeare is brought to the foreground in a little more detail by being plugged into these Elizabethan circuits as an agent in the production of culture, but the reader is continually given the impression, I feel, that Shakespeare serves

as a conveniently stable point of reference in these works for the purpose of demonstrating the reproducibility of the New Historicist method.

Yet these attempts to make Shakespeare the most forceful example of the continued applicability of Greenblatt's New Historicism will not keep the debt collectors at bay. Come *Hamlet in Purgatory*, we see Shakespeare given his due in some degree by virtue of having his plays plugged into a far more literary circuitry, such that there emerges a greater sense of Shakespeare as a key participant in the emergence of a culture of authorship, and yet the book does rely far more heavily on historical evidence about broader social attitudes or, dare we say it, an Elizabethan world view to shape its sense of Shakespeare's capacity to contribute to the shaping of knowledge in more general terms. It would seem, then, that *Hamlet in Purgatory* does not yet repay the debt. *Will in the World*, at last, may be the payment that Greenblatt feels ultimately compelled to give over, as it finally allows the historical figure to exceed the method of interpretation once and for all. Here, in the literary biography, the man is always behind the plays, no matter how difficult his traces may be to locate. To be sure, Greenblatt frequently displays a lack of conviction about his interpretations in this book, which is something that could hardly be said about his previous work. It may be that this willingness to exhibit even the slightest reduction in conviction goes easily hand in hand with the retreat from the establishment of the control mechanism as first principle at the expense of any sense of debt—in full knowledge, of course, that control was always guaranteed in the first place by the establishment of the debt. In place of certainty on the part of the New Historicist, we find in *Will in the World* a preparedness to resort to appeals to the lived truth of the subject matter it purports to address. In this way, I suggest, the author of *Will in the World* finally lets Shakespeare reclaim a place, however intractable, as the author of *his* works, which in turn are allowed to emerge in the academic work as expressions of an individual's "will in the world".

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