

**FACT AND FICTION: THE SLIPPERINESS OF "TRUTH"
IN RENAISSANCE LITERATURE**

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Vasiliki Markidou

Excerpts from Thomas More's *Utopia*

Priests are also responsible for the education of children and adolescents, in which as much stress is laid on moral as on academic training. They do their utmost to ensure that, while children are still at an impressionable age, they're given the right ideas about things- the sort of ideas best inculcated to preserve the structure of their society. If thoroughly absorbed in childhood, these ideas will persist throughout adult life, and so contribute greatly to the safety of the state, which is never seriously threatened except by moral defects arising from wrong ideas (p.105).

Their churches look most impressive, not only because they're so beautifully built, but also because of their size. ... However, they're all rather dark, which is not, I'm told, a mistake on the part of the architects, but a matter of policy. The priests think that too much light tends to distract one's attention, whereas a sort of twilight helps one to collect one's thoughts, and intensifies religious feeling (p.106).

Thomas More, *Utopia*. Trans. by Paul Turner (London et al: Penguin, 2003).

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Excerpts from Steven Greenblatt's book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning:*

From More to Shakespeare

... there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities (p. 1).

... in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of the human identity as a manipulable, artful process. ... As a term for the action or process of making, for particular features or appearance, for a distinct style or pattern, the word had been long in use, but it is in the sixteenth century that *fashion* seems to come into wide currency as a way of designating the forming of a self. This forming may be understood quite literally as the imposition upon a person of physical form- "Did not one fashion us in the womb?" Job asks in the King James Bible, while following the frequent injunctions to "fashion" children, midwives in the period attempted to mold the skulls of the newborn into the proper shape. But, more significantly for our purposes, fashioning may suggest the achievement of a less tangible shape: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving (p. 2).

"There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture," Geertz writes, meaning by culture not primarily "complexes of concrete behavior patterns- customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters"-but rather "a set of control mechanisms- plans, recipes, rules, instructions...- for the governing of behavior." Self-fashioning is in effect the Renaissance version of these control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment. Literature functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of these codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes (pp. 3-4).

We may... not[e] a set of governing conditions common to most instances of self-fashioning - whether of the authors themselves or of their characters- examined here:

1. None of the figures inherits a title, an ancient family tradition or hierarchical status that might have rooted personal identity in the identity of a clan or caste. With the partial exception of Wyatt, all of these writers are middle-class.
2. Self-fashioning for such figures involves submission to an absolute power or authority situated at least partially outside the self -God, a sacred book, an institution such as church, court, colonial or military administration. ...
3. Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other -heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist- must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed.
4. The alien is perceived by the authority either as that which is unformed or chaotic (the absence of order) or that which is false or negative (the demonic parody of order). Since accounts of the former tend inevitably to organize and thematize it, the chaotic constantly slides into the demonic, and consequently the alien is always constructed as a distorted image of the authority.
5. One man's authority is another man's alien.
6. When one authority or alien is destroyed, another takes its place.
7. There is always more than one authority and more than one alien in existence at a given time.
8. If both the authority and the alien are located outside the self, they are at the same time experienced as inward necessities, so that both submission and destruction are always already internalized.
9. Self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language.
10. The power generated to attack the alien in the name of the authority is produced in excess and threatens the authority it sets out to defend. Hence self-fashioning always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self (pp. 8-9).

... we may say that self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien, that what is produced in this encounter partakes of both the authority and the alien that is marked for attack, and hence that any achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss (p. 9).

Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Payne, Michael (ed.), *The Greenblatt Reader* (Oxford et al.: Blackwell, 2005).

INTRODUCTION: GREENBLATT AND NEW HISTORICISM

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While keeping in mind that new historicism is a collection of practices rather than a school or a method, it may be useful to attempt a list of its distinguishing characteristics:

- 1 New historicists think of culture as a semiotic system, as a network of signs.
- 2 They, therefore, are resistant to disciplinary hegemony, finding in inter-disciplinarity an important means of generating new knowledge.
- 3 They are persistently aware that history is both what happened in the past (a set of events) and an account of those events (a story); historical truth arises from a critical reflection on the adequacy of the story that is told.
- 4 History is, therefore, initially a kind of discourse, which is not a denial that there are real events.
- 5 A typical new historicist procedure is to begin with a striking event or anecdote, which has the effect of arousing skepticism about grand historical narratives or essentializing descriptions of a historical period such as the Renaissance. Anecdotes also arrest attention and provide what Greenblatt calls "the touch of the real."
- 6 New historicists are determinedly suspicious of unified, monolithic depictions of cultures or historical periods, insisting that there were countless Elizabethan world views but not a monolithic Elizabethan world picture. Typically such unified myths are created to serve a particular interest in the present, such as the longing for a golden past that Nietzsche calls "antiquarian history."
- 7 Because it is not possible to transcend one's own historical moment, all histories are themselves historically contingent on the present in which they are constructed.
- 8 New historicism is implicitly a critique of literary formalism (or "The New Criticism") that treated literary objects as ahistorical icons. The reexamination of the relationship between literature and history is a high priority for new historicists.
- 9 Just as it is no longer tenable to think of a literary text as a detached object that is independent of its author and readers, so also is it no longer possible to think of the past as an object that is detachable from its textual reconstruction.
- 10 It is also no longer tenable for students of literature to think of history as some sort of detachable background to iconic works of verbal (or other kinds of) art. History and literature are mutually imbricated.⁶

Two of Greenblatt's texts that readily illustrate these principles and assumptions are his magisterial *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which had a transformative impact on Renaissance studies, and his Introduction to *The Norton Shakespeare*, which is currently his most influential piece of public pedagogy. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* examines the perception, which has been part of Renaissance historiography since Burckhardt and Michelet, that "there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities" (p. 1).