

tually one of the community of New England writers. Raised in that "South, which has been called a Christ-haunted place . . . something like New England a hundred years ago," Percy himself, like all serious southern writers, was also a spiritual New Englander. According to all indi-

cations, however, Walker Percy may be the last of this line.

—*Lewis P. Simpson is the former editor of the Southern Review and the author of, most recently, Mind and the American Civil War (1989).*

The Return of History

LEARNING TO CURSE: Essays in Early Modern Culture. By Stephen J. Greenblatt. Routledge. 188 pp. \$25

Something strange is happening to Shakespeare. Anyone who reads current Shakespeare criticism expecting to find high-minded debates over the nature of irony and ambiguity (let alone cozy discussions about order, degree, and hierarchy or the ethics of revenge) is in for a big surprise. Scholars are now likelier to be found tracking the Bard amid narratives of early encounters with Native Americans, Tudor treatises on gynecology and tranvestism, 16th-century exorcisms and trials for witchcraft, erotic dreams about Queen Elizabeth, the policing of the London suburbs, or the Renaissance vogue for collecting artefacts, fossils, and ostrich eggs. Whatever one's response to this new turn happens to be, boredom will not likely be part of it.

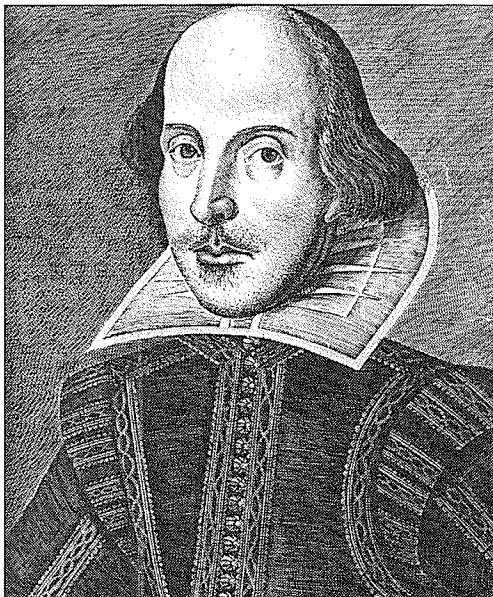
How fashions change. The New Criticism of the last generation held that history was marginal to the study of literature. New Critics like Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt were obsessed with "close

reading," with intricate and detailed explication of the work—with text rather than context. Authors were seen as individual geniuses who used irony and ambiguity to rise above local considerations. They wrote at a safe distance from the frantic activity of their world, producing texts that were unbounded by time.

For the past two decades, however, history has been reentering the study of literature. Indeed, in the 1980s, the "New Historicism" captured the academic highground by all but erasing the once-firm boundary between a literary work and its historical context.

Stephen Greenblatt, a professor of English at Berkeley, can claim paternity for

this school. *Learning to Curse* follows *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) in redrawing the Shakespearean map. Influenced by anthropology, linguistics, and social theory, Greenblatt argues that history is no mere background for literature. Shakespeare's plays may seem to rise above their contexts, but in truth they were no less involved than nonliterary documents in the



ceaseless economic, social, and political transactions of their time.

What Greenblatt means by history, however, is not easy to define. He has little use for kings and queens, battles and parliaments. Narratives of high politics he sees mainly as stories that rulers tell to legitimate their own authority. Greenblatt's preferred canvas is history from the margins, the stories that usually get overlooked.

Greenblatt likes to construct his essays around a historical anecdote, preferably one about people who lived and worked on the edges of society, involving actions that seem to us baffling or inexplicable. Greenblatt draws out the underlying power structures that conditioned these people's curious behavior; then he reveals the same structures at work in the period's "high" culture (including plays by Shakespeare). In one essay, "Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture," Greenblatt relates the queer story of Martin Guerre—a story already known to American audiences through a historical novel by Janet Lewis, an analytical study by Natalie Zemon Davis, and the film *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982). Martin Guerre, a French peasant from Artigat, disappeared from his home at the age of 24. His place was taken for several years by an impostor whose claim to be the real Martin was accepted even by his family. With its traumatic substitutions and doublings, and its Freudian scenario of alienated selfhood, the story sounds curiously modern. Yet what strikes Greenblatt is that those involved were less concerned about the impostor's true self than about the purely outward and legalistic testimonies to his identity. To family and friends, Martin's identity was not a matter of personality but of property, claims that could be contractually established. Having swerved so far from Shakespeare's plays, Greenblatt now returns, enriching our understanding of characters such as Viola in *Twelfth Night*, who finds that her own identity has been challenged by a mysterious double. Viola seems real to us because of the psychological trauma she undergoes. But, from the angle of Mar-

tin Guerre, her identity is not her own and can only be authenticated by the will of her community as a whole. Greenblatt shows that a character whose actions seem to be reassuringly individual and self-willed turns out on inspection to be playing to a hidden, socially conditioned script. Greenblatt thus establishes the hidden relationship between a literary work and the workings of social power.

Greenblatt's historicism has spawned a host of imitations, so many indeed that no Shakespeare essay is complete without its quirky anecdote. But there are problems with a method that permits so open a definition of "history." Greenblatt seeks to expose the communal beliefs and practices that determined the shape of Shakespeare's plays. Yet he relies on an "arbitrary connectedness"—analogies and symbolic relationships between the plays and their society—which has to be accepted on trust.

It is clear, too, from the kinds of anecdotes he prefers, that for all his interest in history and anthropology Greenblatt has a quite contemporary agenda. His anecdotes usually relate acts of violence perpetrated in the name of empire, confusions over gender categories, or the vulnerability of the individual before the power of the state. While this makes for exciting Shakespeare, there is something disturbingly ahistorical about it. The past is not so much recovered as made over into an image of the present. As much as Greenblatt insists on the historical embeddedness of the Bard, he recruits him in the service of exclusively modern preoccupations.

Indeed, Greenblatt steers us into an historical dead end. Because he implies that literary works are absolutely saturated with society's practices and beliefs, even texts once considered subversive turn out to be colluding with power. In the *Henry IV* plays, for example, Prince Hal can admit that his sovereignty rests on an act of usurpation. But, despite his ostensible bad faith, spectators identify with him anyway.

Greenblatt is fascinated with works that appear to unsettle systems of authority but,

at a deeper level, only reinforce them. For example, he takes up Rabelais's mocking comedy and the notion that it encourages a subversion of orthodox norms and values. But Greenblatt argues that Rabelaisian laughter, by releasing aggression in a nonviolent form, admits the impotence of its own gestures of rebellion. "The gesture of insult is at the same time an acknowledgement of defeat," he says; it testifies to the enduring power of what is being mocked. Again, in an essay on Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, he brings out the surprising but deceptive modernity of Marlowe's social analysis by juxtaposing it with Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question." Like Karl Marx, Marlowe uses anti-Semitism to expose the underlying materialism of his society. In his play, the Maltese Christians bait the Jew Barabas, but the Jewishness which they revile exemplifies the market mentality of their own world. "Marlowe never discredits anti-Semitism, but he does discredit early in the play a 'Christian' social concern that might otherwise have been used to counter a specifically Jewish antisocial element." To both Marlowe and Marx, society is cursed by the power of money. The difference is that Marlowe had no expectations that it might ever be better. Indeed, his laughter at utopian solutions is no less harsh than his ridicule of sacred cows. Marlowe's politics were radical, Greenblatt writes, but also radically devoid of hope.

Greenblatt's Renaissance is thus powerfully politicized but also profoundly pessimistic. Because literature is locked so firmly into the structures of its historical moment, there is no way off the ferris wheel, nothing it can achieve beyond constantly if unwillingly testifying to the dominance of the powers that be. Yet this unavailing conclusion surely arises from the method itself. In Greenblattian history not much can be done other than endlessly to recycle social energy.

This ruptured radicalism tells us as much about the situation of academics in the 1990s as it does about Shakespeare's situation in the 1590s. It is certainly not surprising at this juncture to find so subtle and searching a critique of power being combined with so gloomy a conviction that nothing can ever be done about it. Toward the end of this volume, Greenblatt analyzes the political language of present-day America and finds it involved in the same dizzying circulations of power which criticize authority yet ultimately reaffirm it. If the America of Reagan and Bush gives way to possibilities for more profound change, Greenblatt's Shakespeare may, conceivably, be the first citizen to change along with it.

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OTHER TITLES

Arts & Letters

MYTHOLOGIES. *Compiled by Yves Bonnefoy. Trans. under the direction of Wendy Doniger. 2 volumes. Univ. of Chicago. 1267 pp. \$250*

Once the surest way to write a bestseller was to write a cookbook. Today it may be to write a

book on mythology—or so the response to Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* (1988), Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990), and Rollo May's *The Cry for Myth* (1991) seems to suggest. In these works mythology resembles do-it-yourself psychotherapy. The individual is instructed to create his own religion or to "follow his bliss" or to take the hero's voyage through the underworld of his own problems.