

A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism

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chapter 9

New Historicist Literary Criticism

New historicist criticism represents one of the most important trends in literary study in the past decade. Like traditional historical scholars, new historicists accept the basic importance of historical context in the reading of literary works. But the new historicism departs from traditional historical scholarship in important and crucial ways. Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds summarize the essence of these differences: "For the most part, new historicism can be distinguished from 'old' historicism by its lack of faith in 'objectivity' and 'permanence' and its stress not upon the direct recreation of the past, but rather the processes by which the past is constructed or invented" ("Historicist" 4).

Building on the insights of recent poststructuralist theory, new historicists are intensely aware of the fundamental *textuality* of history. In particular, new historicists understand that no amount of historical scholarship can uncover the ultimate "truth" of history. All historical accounts are partial, and all are conditioned by the terms of inquiry. It is important, a new historicist critic would argue, to read William Shakespeare within the context of the culture of Elizabethan England. But cultures are extremely complex entities, and "Elizabethan England" cannot be simply described. Despite the large amount of available material, historical information is necessarily incomplete; we can never know everything there is to know about our own society, much less a society from hundreds of years in the past about which much detailed information will always have been lost. Meanwhile the amount of historical information available about Elizabethan England is vast; any historian investigating the period must focus on specific aspects of Elizabethan society while making certain choices about which information and documents to include in her analysis and which material to disregard. New historicist scholars are intensely aware that their own decisions concerning

the focus of their investigations and the kinds of information to employ in pursuing their conclusions have a powerful impact on the resulting historical visions they produce. They also extend their recognition of the importance of historical context to their own activities, understanding that their own situation in contemporary culture exerts a powerful influence on the ways they view cultures from the past. A new historicist scholar in the 1990s knows that he cannot produce a "pure" picture of Elizabethan culture; he can only produce a partial picture of certain aspects of Elizabethan culture as seen through the eyes (and prejudices) of an inhabitant of the 1990s.

New historicist criticism derives from a number of important influences and participates in a quite broad turn toward social, political, and historical concerns in recent literary criticism. The new historicist emphasis on material practices in society bears obvious affinities to the historical materialism of Karl Marx, and new historicist analysis in general often recalls the cultural criticism of neo-Marxists such as Raymond Williams. At the same time, new historicism is importantly informed by "textualist" models of history and society deriving from the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and particularly recalling the more recent poststructuralist criticism of Paul de Man. Stephen Greenblatt, probably the most influential practitioner of the new historicism (and the person often credited with having coined the term—though he tends to refer to his own project as "cultural poetics" rather than new historicism), thus suggests that "an openness to the theoretical ferment of the last few years is precisely what distinguishes the new historicism from the positivist historical scholarship of the early twentieth century" ("Towards" 1). In a famous formulation, Louis Montrose summarizes the distinctive combination of cultural materialism and poststructuralist textualism that informs the new historicism as

a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. By *the historicity of texts*, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing. . . . By *the textuality of history*, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the "documents" upon which historians ground their own texts. ("Professing" 20)

Probably the most important theoretical inspiration for the new historicism is provided by the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault's impressive body of work (described in more detail in chapter 8) includes a number of historical studies that have pointed the way for new historicist critics. In works such as *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault utilizes massive amounts of

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historical research to develop detailed descriptions of the history of various social institutions and practices and various habits of thought. Foucault is, however, quite well aware that his own habits of thought shape the outcome of these investigations. Viewing society as the product of a complex network of interacting discourses, the relationships among which are conditioned by questions of power, Foucault attempts to read specific discourses and to draw conclusions about the power relationships that inform them. At the same time, he insists that these relationships are too complex to be understood completely and that the events of history are driven by interrelationships far too complicated to be described in terms of simple cause-effect sequences. He thus eschews the grand historical narratives often produced by traditional historians, insisting that we cannot "understand events in terms of . . . some great evolutionary process" (*Discipline* 129).

Foucault's reminders of the necessary limitations of historical descriptions, together with the models provided by his own intellectual practice, have inspired new historicist critics. Another important source of new historical method is the work of cultural anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, whose studies of cultural rituals and theatrical traditions in various cultures provide important procedural models. Geertz, for example, performs extensive field work in which he collects large amounts of data about the cultures he is studying—much like many traditional anthropologists. However he eschews the tendencies of traditional social science to dehumanize foreign cultures by viewing them through totalizing theories or reducing them to a mere set of data for analysis by quantitative scientific techniques. Geertz's "symbolic anthropology" focuses on "culture," which for Geertz means "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (*Interpretation* 89).

Somewhat in the mode of the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Geertz views culture largely as a system of signs and codes that govern behavior and allow different individuals to communicate. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, however, Geertz does not attempt to develop overall models for the functioning of these codes in a given culture, in the manner of Ferdinand de Saussure's study of *la langue*, the system of codes and conventions by which languages operate. Instead Geertz focuses on a cultural version of Saussure's *parole*, paying close and careful attention to specific cultural practices but refusing to draw general conclusions about a culture from these specific studies. Instead Geertz seeks to find individual events, performances, or practices that he can interpret in great detail, developing "local knowledge" of this specific phenomenon rather than "global knowledge" of the culture as a whole. Geertz refers to his technique as "thick description" of culture, and his focus on very specific and local aspects of culture can be seen as a cultural version of the close reading strategies of the New Critics. Indeed Geertz himself has suggested that his approach is "like that of the literary critic" (9).

Geertz's own comparison of his work to the interpretation of literary texts suggests the relevance of his anthropological writings to literary study. Indeed

coming at a time when decades of New Critical dominance had in the view of some virtually exhausted the interpretation of most canonical texts, Geertz's work proved inspirational to literary scholars in its demonstration of the constant availability of new interpretations. Geertz's frequent emphasis on marginal cultural events and institutions also suggested that important knowledge could be gained from the interpretation of marginal literary texts and thus added impetus to the attempts of many literary scholars to expand the scope of their work beyond the traditional canon. Geertz's technique is well illustrated in his influential essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (*Interpretation* 412-453). Noting that Bali has been well studied by a number of traditional anthropological scholars, Geertz demonstrates that it is still possible to derive new and important insights into Balinese society. He develops these insights by focusing on the cockfight, a seemingly marginal element of Balinese culture. Through close observation and extensive interpretation, Geertz convincingly reveals aspects of Balinese social life that had escaped the attention of traditional scholars, with their emphasis on more "important" mainstream aspects of Balinese society.

Applied to literature, the new historical methods inspired by the work of thinkers such as Foucault and Geertz produce not only a distinctive style of literary criticism but also a distinctive vision of the relationship between literary and society. Much in the vein of poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, new historicists see literary texts as the product of complex intertextual relationships rather than of the individual creative genius of the author. But where Barthes and Derrida locate intertextuality primarily in the realm of language itself, new historicists (influenced by Foucault's vision of social forces as the productive interaction of various discourses) locate intertextuality in culture and society. Contrary to the New Critical insistence on the autonomy of literary texts and on the importance of reading such texts "intrinsically," new historicists believe that it makes no sense to separate literary texts from the social context around them because such texts are the product of complex social "exchanges" or "negotiations." There is, in fact, no such thing as an intrinsic approach to literature, both because literary texts come into existence through a close involvement with the context around them and because literary critics (and all readers) necessarily bring an entire array of extrinsic knowledge, assumptions, and preoccupations with them when they read literary texts, no matter how formalist their style of interpretation might appear. For new historicists, we can thus understand the real significance of literary texts only by paying close and careful attention to the nature and implications of the cultural exchanges and negotiations that bring these texts into being, while also remaining aware that the process of reading is itself a culturally situated exchange.

New historicist readings of cultural negotiations and exchanges are necessarily partial and contingent, both because these readings are themselves cultural negotiations and because culture is far too complex and multiple to be encompassed within any single vision. Different new historicist critics emphasize different aspects of culture and therefore achieve different results with their new historical readings. Montrose thus entitles an important essay on the approach

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"New Historicisms" to indicate the multiplicity of the field. And Jerome McGann, an important new historicist critic importantly influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin as well as Foucault, has made pluralism a central part of his own political and critical project. The flexibility of new historical methods is one of the great strengths of the approach, though it has also led to a certain amount of confusion over just what the approach entails and just what ideological position it occupies. But despite this multiplicity, certain basic assumptions are common to new historical critics, regardless of their ideological orientation. For H. Aram Veeser, for example, new historicist critics can be identified by the presence of the following basic assumptions in their work:

1. That every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. That every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. That literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;
4. That no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. . . . That a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. (xi)

One of the important early works of the new historicism is Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), a book that was both influenced by the work of Foucault and itself influenced the later stages of Foucault's technologies of the self project. Here Greenblatt examines the work of English Renaissance writers such as Sir Thomas More, William Tyndale, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare to look at the ways these writers attempt, through their writing, to fashion their personal identities amid the cultural context of Renaissance England. While Greenblatt sees a strong aesthetic component to this self-fashioning, he also insists that the social and cultural contexts in which these writers lived and worked placed strict limitations on the kinds of selves they could fashion. Indeed Greenblatt argues that "there may well have been less *autonomy* in self-fashioning in the sixteenth century than before, that family, state, and religious institutions impose a more rigid and far-reaching discipline upon their middle-class and aristocratic subjects" (1). In addition, Greenblatt points the way for much subsequent new historical criticism by supplementing his readings of the texts of major writers with readings of a number of more marginal contemporary documents and anecdotes. He also acknowledges that his interpretation of the self-fashioning of writers from More to Shakespeare is conditioned by his own project of self-fashioning in the late twentieth century.

Greenblatt ultimately concludes that most of these writers shape identities for themselves within the context of submission to some outside authority: "God, a sacred book, an institution such as church, court, colonial or military administration" (9). In the course of his readings, Greenblatt develops a detailed description of the complex interrelationship among religion, sexuality, politics,

literature, and other discourses within the context of sixteenth-century England. He finds that all of the writers he studies ultimately fashion their identities through their relationships to official power (religious or secular). More and Tyndale, for example, largely fashion their identities through radical opposition to the state and the church, respectively, yet both authors do so within the context of a search for a higher power that will replace the authority of the one they challenge. Spenser thoroughly aligns himself with both secular and religious authority and against alien threats to that authority. Marlowe fashions his identity through opposition to official power of all kinds and through "a subversive identification with the alien" (203).

Greenblatt's model thus posits Marlowe as the most antiauthoritarian of sixteenth-century writers, with Spenser as the poet most supportive of authority. Spenser and Marlowe are thus "mighty opposites, poised in antagonism as radical as that of More and Tyndale in the 1530s. If Spenser sees human identity as conferred by loving service to legitimate authority, to the yoke power of God and the state, Marlowe sees identity established at those moments in which order—political theological, sexual—is violated" (222). But for Greenblatt, the terms of Marlowe's rebellion against authority are strictly set by the powers against which he rebels, and Marlowe is in some ways as much a product of official power as is Spenser. Greenblatt thus argues that Marlowe's plays are populated by rebels who, like Marlowe himself, "imagine themselves set in diametrical opposition to their society where in fact they have unwittingly accepted its crucial structural elements" (209).

Although critics have seen Greenblatt's emphasis on the conditioning of art by social and cultural power as "demystifying" the traditional critical respect for the greatness of English Renaissance literature, he continues to show a great deal of admiration for that literature in his work. Moreover he comes to the rather unrevolutionary conclusion that Shakespeare is probably the richest of English Renaissance writers because his relation to official power is the most complex. In particular, Shakespeare ultimately functions for Greenblatt as a combination of Marlowe and Spenser, paying obedient homage to official power while radically challenging that power through the uniquely complex and paradoxical nature of his drama: "If there are intimations in Shakespeare of a release from the complex narrative orders in which everyone is inscribed, these intimations do not arise from bristling resistance or strident denunciation. . . . They arise paradoxically from a peculiarly intense *submission* whose downright violence undermines everything it was meant to shore up" (254).

Shakespeare, then, is in a sense not the most unusual of Renaissance dramatists but the most conventional, displaying in his drama a conventionality so extreme that it ultimately undermines convention. But for Greenblatt, this paradoxical movement tells us less about Shakespeare's mind and talent than about the contradictory and paradoxical nature of the Elizabethan society that Shakespeare so strikingly reflects. Greenblatt extends this analysis in the later *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988), perhaps the single most influential work of literary criticism to have been produced by a new historicist scholar. In this

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book, Greenblatt produces a number of important new insights into literature by examining the work of Shakespeare, the most thoroughly researched and interpreted writer in all of literature. Greenblatt thus demonstrates that the interpretation of literary texts is always incomplete and that new interpretations can always be produced. He also convincingly demonstrates the special ability of the new historicism to generate such new interpretations. In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Greenblatt also perfects his own distinctive critical style, which has come to be considered by many as paradigmatic of the new historicism. Seizing on very specific moments in particular Shakespearean plays, Greenblatt discusses at length the relationship between these moments and larger phenomena in Elizabethan culture as a whole. He focuses his attention not on close and careful reading of Shakespeare's texts and their language but on reading of (sometimes seemingly marginal) contemporary cultural texts (diaries, chronicles, church and municipal records) that illuminate Shakespeare's plays in important ways. Greenblatt is thus able to show that Elizabethan England was a time of great crisis and uncertainty over fundamental issues such as religion, political power, and gender and that this unusual state of crisis energizes Shakespeare's plays.

In the opening chapter of *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Greenblatt provides a convenient list of rules that inform his reading of Shakespeare, and this list (similar on many points to that provided by Veenser) can be taken as indicative of the rules followed by new historicist scholars as a whole:

1. There can be no appeals to genius as the sole origin of the energies of great art.
2. There can be no motiveless creation.
3. There can be no transcendent or timeless or unchanging representation.
4. There can be no autonomous artifacts.
5. There can be no expression without an origin and an object, a *from* and a *for*.
6. There can be no art without social energy.
7. There can be no spontaneous generation of social energy. (12)

Greenblatt accompanies these negative commandments with a list of "generative principles," including the assumption that literary texts can be read as a sort of "cultural capital" that is produced by "negotiation and exchange." Much in the vein of Foucault's description of power as an immanent field that precedes any notion of human agency, Greenblatt insists that these negotiations and exchanges, while often involving individuals, are ultimately the product of larger social forces. Indeed he insists that "individuals are themselves the products of collective exchange" (12).

Shakespearean Negotiations employs a significantly more sophisticated and complex model of culture and society than had *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, in which Greenblatt's figuration of Elizabethan society tended to reduce to dualistic oppositions between official power and opposition to that power—with official power always tending to come out on top. In the later book, however,

Greenblatt puts his emphasis on the complexity of Elizabethan society, arguing extensively that it is indeed the multifaceted and sometimes contradictory nature of this society that gives Shakespeare's work its distinctive quality. For Greenblatt, Shakespeare is not a unique and transcendent genius whose greatness lies in his ability to escape his historical situation and to express universal and timeless human truths. On the contrary, Shakespeare's work is great because of his singular ability to draw on the energies generated by the conflicts in his contemporary society. Shakespeare, in short, is special neither because his works reflect universal human truths nor because he writes in a time of unparalleled cultural greatness and integration. Shakespeare's works have a special energy precisely because they are so firmly embedded in their own historical context and because that context was a time of conflict, crisis, and fragmentation.

Greenblatt emphasizes again and again that Elizabethan cultural wholeness and grandeur have been exaggerated not only in the historical record but also during Elizabeth's reign. Elizabethan England was a time of famine, pestilence, and political violence, the true nature of which was obscured at the time (and for generations of historians) by a Renaissance version of the Big Lie, by an intentional strategy of pretending to cultural and political greatness. Assuming the throne in a time of chaotic social and political fragmentation, Elizabeth was able to hold that throne by patching together a makeshift political alliance of various noblemen and aristocrats. And she did so largely through sheer theater, through the production of spectacles that made her *seem* a grand and powerful ruler, even if she was not. Queen Elizabeth was "a ruler without a standing army, without a highly developed bureaucracy, without an extensive police force, a ruler whose power is constituted in theatrical celebrations of royal glory and theatrical violence visited upon the enemies of that glory" (64).

History attests to the success of Elizabeth's attempts to simulate power through official theater. Greenblatt also emphasizes that the spectacular surface of Elizabethan politics obscures what was in fact a time of intense social and political crisis when powerful competing forces were already creating the rifts that would within a few decades explode in revolution and civil war. The work of other scholars supports this vision of Elizabethan society. In *The Illusion of Power* (1975), Stephen Orgel precedes Greenblatt with an extensive exploration of the theatricality of power in Elizabethan England. Jeffrey Knapp's recent *An Empire Nowhere* (1992) is a wide-ranging examination of Elizabethan society that demonstrates that the Elizabethan period was not the time of burgeoning English power and prestige that popular stereotypes would have it be. In fact, looking at literary works from More to Shakespeare and drawing on a number of Elizabethan historical documents as well, Knapp concludes that the worldwide extent of England's political domination and influence was actually *decreasing* during most of Elizabeth's reign.

The work of such scholars suggests a considerable revaluation of historical accounts of Renaissance England, which often functions as a utopian golden age in the modern imagination. This grand vision of the Renaissance has been especially prominent in literary studies, where Elizabethan England (dominated by the towering figure of Shakespeare as the "greatest genius" of the English

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literary tradition) has often figured as the high point of English cultural productivity and creativity, a time of cultural wholeness from which subsequent English literary history represents a decline into fragmentation and confusion. Numerous modern artists, for example, have responded to the seeming chaos of twentieth-century history by contrasting the modern world to the seemingly more tranquil and stable world of the Elizabethans. Thus artists otherwise as different in their ideologies as T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf have both envisioned Renaissance England as a period of ideal wholeness and integration as opposed to the cultural and psychic fragmentation that for them informs the modern world. New historical studies of the contradictions of Elizabethan society obviously challenge this vision of the English Renaissance. The rereadings of Shakespeare and other Renaissance writers by new historicist critics are important not only for what they tell us about Elizabethan literature and culture but also for what they tell us about modern literature and culture—and about the institution of literature as a whole. A dual temporal focus—on the historical contexts of the author and of the critic—is central to new historical method.

Renaissance England remains (under the impetus of the work of Montrose, Greenblatt, Orgel, Knapp, and others) in many ways the center of the new historical project, though new historicist critics tend to prefer the term *early modern period* to *Renaissance*, partially to avoid the glorification traditionally associated with the latter term. The success of the new historical method in early modern studies has attracted critics working in other periods as well. Even scholars of modern and contemporary literature, to which the method is least obviously applicable, have taken important turns toward new historical analysis in recent years. Walter Benn Michaels applies new historicist methods to American naturalism; Vincent Pecora reads Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and James Joyce's story "The Dead" through contemporary historical documents and issues; and Cheryl Herr, R. B. Kershner, and Jennifer A. Wicke, among others, extensively explore the relationship between Joyce and his contemporary Irish social and cultural context. And Alan Sinfield's cultural materialist readings of contemporary British literature and culture have a great deal in common with new historicist studies.

In short, the new historicism has been extremely successful in the past decade as more and more critics have turned to the method to find new ways to extend our understanding of literary texts. For example, a recent anthology on the latest trends in literary study published by the Modern Language Association includes a striking (if not surprising, given that the book is edited by Greenblatt and Giles Gunn) emphasis on new historical techniques and insights. Indeed the success of the method has become so widespread that many of its original practitioners are concerned that it may be in danger of losing its critical force. Montrose thus worries that the new historicism is "on its way to becoming the latest academic orthodoxy—not so much a critique as a subject of ideological appropriation" ("Renaissance" 7 n4).

Meanwhile despite its popularity, the method has also been highly controversial and has come in for a significant amount of opposition. Somewhat like deconstruction, the new historicism has been seen by some critics as too

dependent on the interpretive and stylistic virtuosity of individual practitioners. Greenblatt's extremely well-written essays tend to be entertaining, informative, and insightful, but they depend on extremely perceptive readings of cultural documents. It is not clear whether in the hands of less talented critics the new historicism will be able to produce such impressive results. Some critics feel that the emphasis on cultural context in the new historicism puts the method in danger of losing sight of the aesthetic properties of literary texts, whereas others argue just the opposite: that the conclusions reached in new historical readings of texts (such as Greenblatt's emphasis on paradox in Shakespeare) often sound suspiciously similar to the characteristic conclusions of the New Criticism.

Criticisms of the political implications of the new historicism are similarly double-edged. Some critics have seen the political flexibility of the new historicism as evidence of confusion and lack of commitment while viewing the frequent new historical emphasis on contradictions in culture and society as symptomatic of contradictions within the new historicism itself. The relationship of the new historicism to politically informed critical approaches such as Marxism and feminism has been particularly vexed, especially as it appears that new historical methods can be used equally well either by Marxists and feminists or by critics with little interest in (or even antipathy toward) Marxism and feminism. Catherine Gallagher summarizes the complex attitude taken toward the new historicism by its political critics:

Critics of the "new historicism" have given wildly different accounts of its political implications, but they generally agree that its politics are obnoxious. Charged on the one hand with being a crude version of Marxism and on the other with being a formalist equivalent of colonialism, the new historicism attracts an unusual amount of specifically political criticism for a criticism whose politics are so difficult to specify. ("Marxism" 37)

The complex combination of historicism and poststructuralism that gives the new historicism much of its distinctive character has also brought the method in for considerable criticism from opposing perspectives. Brook Thomas, for example, argues that the new historicism is not poststructuralist *enough* and that in the final analysis it tends to reduce to conventional "old" historicism. Thomas sees poststructuralism as a reaction against the tradition of historicism, concluding that the new historicism remains too rooted in the historical tradition to be genuinely poststructuralist. He argues that the impulse toward historicism is a central characteristic of modernity, with its consistent privileging of the new. Modern historians, claims Thomas, always tend to assume that "history will always be made new. As a result, the history of historicism is marked by perpetual claims to newness" ("New" 189). Moreover Thomas goes on to argue that historians have long acknowledged that they "do not objectively and scientifically recover the past but construct it from a present perspective" (195). Thomas does see promise in new historical method but urges that new historicist critics draw on poststructuralism to develop more fundamental and radical challenges to their historicist assumptions.

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If for Thomas new historicist critics sometimes miss the point of post-structuralism by relying too much on historicist assumptions, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that new historicists miss the point of historicism by relying too much on poststructuralist assumptions. For Fox-Genovese, the central conviction of the new historicism is that "we think, exist, know, only through text—that extratextual considerations defy proof and, accordingly, relevance" (218). But it is these extratextual considerations that allow historians to deal with the material reality of history, something she sees new historicists as unable to do. "Notwithstanding some notable exceptions," Fox-Genovese concludes of the new historicism, "it is not very historical" (214). Indeed such charges of ahistoricism are probably the most common complaints against the new historicism, many critics of which feel that the emphasis on thick descriptions of specific times and places leaves new historicists with no way to deal with historical process and change. Moreover the new historical emphasis on the embeddedness of individuals within networks of official power seems for some critics to leave no room for effective opposition to that power. For example, because of the seeming conclusion that official power is ultimately inescapable and that any attempts at subversion are liable to appropriation in the interests of official power, Greenblatt's vision of Elizabethan society in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* has been criticized by some as overly pessimistic and as leading to political quietism.

Despite such criticisms, there can be little doubt that the new historicism has been a tremendous energizing force in recent literary criticism because of both its development of new insights into the work of major authors and its demonstration of procedural models for the development of such insights. Meanwhile the method is still developing, and promises to continue to do so for some time, in response to its antagonists and to the self-criticisms of its practitioners, who consistently meditate on the limitations of the method even as they practice it. The controversy and criticism produced by new historical scholarship—even from sources outside the academy—are themselves a potentially positive result of the method. As Montrose puts it, the sometimes hostile reactions to the new historicism are valuable because they confirm that "the academy is perceived as a site for contestation as well as for reproduction of ideological dominants; that there may be something important at stake in our reading, teaching, and revision of the literary canon; and that, if we suddenly discover ourselves to be culturally and institutionally empowered, we are now compelled to choose if, when, and how to employ that power" ("New" 416).

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