

Book Review

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespeare's Freedom*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010. 144 pp. \$24.00



Stephen Greenblatt's latest work, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, begins with the following sentence: "Shakespeare as a writer is the embodiment of human freedom" (1). This simple, yet, powerful thesis drives his argument forward as he discusses the "limits...of [Shakespeare's] particular freedom"(1) as well as his ability to transcend the common absolutist rules that dictated everything from "love, faith, grace, damnation, and redemption" during the era (2). The key to Greenblatt's reasoning resides in the idea that an artist can transcend any social or cultural mandate by simply envisioning the artist as a creator; someone who can reorder the world in such a way that their true authority relies in their ability to "suspend or alter ordinary social rules" (13-14). This statement has been made countless times before, however, the precision and clarity with which Greenblatt compares Shakespeare's autonomy and his political climate makes for an argument full of enlightenment, profound engagement, and rich complexity.

Greenblatt makes the complicated reasoning in this book seem unfettered through a succinct structure. The book is divided into five concise chapters: an introduction to the historical conditions of Shakespeare's time; the view of beauty, hatred, and the ethics of authority as they apply to early modern perceptions on these codes; and, lastly, a brief summary chapter on Shakespearean autonomy. The first chapter helps to situate the reader within the political conversation of the early modern period, particularly the discussion on absolute monarchy and its connection to the rule of law. In the chapters related to beauty, hatred, and ethics, Greenblatt's thesis is given the most analysis. These chapters set up the historical backdrop alongside a bevy of carefully selected scenes from

multiple plays to test Shakespeare's reaction against the common thoughts that prevailed at the time.

The chapter titled "Shakespearean Beauty Marks" is the best example of how Greenblatt employs this structure to aid his argument. He begins his line of reasoning with the early modern view on proportions with the ideal proportion being related to harmony in the whole: a face and body without any distinguishable marks. During this period there was a common privileging of featurelessness where blemishes such as wrinkles and scars were not praiseworthy because they were either seen as marks of imperfection—signs of ungodliness in a Christian context—or they were reminders of mortality. There could, however, be exceptions, such as scars from war being figured as a mark of honor, a tactic used by Shakespeare for some of his warrior characters. The freedoms from these constraints are founded on the breaking of these mores as Shakespeare constantly overthrows the typical outlook of beauty. As an artist, Shakespeare has the authority to create a new form of beauty. This freedom can be found in the dark complexion of Rosaline in *Love's Labor Lost* or in Innogen's mole in *Cymbeline*, in which Shakespeare "departs from the norm" by asserting the mole as natural and not an inherently evil marker. This analysis is not a new thought in Shakespearean studies, but Greenblatt's knowledge of the historical context helps the reader understand how Shakespeare is working against the contemporaneous values. The ease in which these complex connections are made, therefore, appeal to a broad audience.

While some readers of this book may not have come into contact with the lesser known plays that Greenblatt mentions, this book will be a delightful read to the general audience as well as Shakespeare scholars. This accomplishment lies within Greenblatt's brilliant summaries and innovative writing style, a style captured skillfully in the chapter on "Shakespeare and the Ethics of Authority." Greenblatt opens this chapter with a personal anecdote of a conversation he once had with Bill Clinton about *Macbeth*, something that seems unrelated to the thesis, but then Greenblatt ties back into the major theme of his investigation. With the use of a single quote from a former president, "I think *Macbeth* is a great play about someone whose immense ambition has an ethically inadequate object," (75) the reader is set up for a major revelation and the theme for Greenblatt's analysis: Shakespearean rulers, more times than not, are not

divinely sanctioned and those that are often succumb to an order that is "on occasion dressed in moral robes" (79). The analysis here provides the reader with the overall belief in Shakespeare's ability to go against absolutist thoughts.

However, what the argument of this book really does, at a more profound level, is allow the reader to see the valence of the term "autonomy" as it changes in current western thought. Greenblatt starts his concluding chapter with a description of the word "autonomy" and what it meant during the early modern era, in summary: "to live by one's own law" (95). During a time of divinely inspired monarchy, to live outside the rules was a heinous crime, but Shakespeare, a masterful rhetorician, could apply these definitions differently. Here, the genius of Greenblatt's argument appears—in a world of creations, a world of the artist, there can be no subjugation. It is a world of the fantastic, a world away from social law. This thought applies across time and space where the unrealistic happenings in literature can covertly exterminate a current idea in reality, or even make a mockery of modern trends. A case in point is at the end of a *Midsummer's Night's Dream* wherein the play ends without justice being served on the lovers—a ridicule of the patriarchal social system established at the beginning of the play. For Greenblatt, Shakespeare's outstanding abilities lie in his "liberty to live after his own laws [where] his creations were singularly unconstrained" (114). These last remarks circulate to a thought asserted in his introduction, that Shakespeare amicably relates to the Frankfurt school wherein art is a "sphere of radical freedom" (117), a thought often shadowed through the formation of some of his investigations but is always subtly present.

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