

*Solo performances: New perspectives on Shakespeare and the individual*

Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. 246 pp. – ISBN 978-0-521-76067-6. – £ 55.00 (US \$ 95.00) (hb.)

Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*. Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 2010. 144 pp. – ISBN 978-0-226-30666-7. – (hb.)

Jill Phillips Ingram, *Idioms of Self-Interest: Credit, Identity, and Property in English Renaissance Literature*. Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory. Ed. William E. Cain. New York & London: Routledge, 2006. 182 pp. – ISBN 978-0-415-87939-2. – £ 23.50 (pb.)

Ute Berns, ed., *Solo Performances: Staging the Early Modern Self in England*. Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 132. Ed. Alberto Martino. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2010. 272 pp. – ISBN 978-90-420-2952-1. – € 54.00 (US \$ 78.00) (pb.)

Judging from the four books under review, Stephen Greenblatt's well-worn notion of 'Renaissance self-fashioning' is as influential and productive as ever, though in varied ways. For Peter Holbrook, in *Shakespeare's Individualism*, it is the attempt to preserve an element of "authentic individual human freedom" in the face of widespread "social control and manipulation" (65, n. 21) that makes Greenblatt's view of Renaissance selfhood attractive. Holbrook, however, has no interest in the new historicism. His Shakespeare is essentially a modern writer whose works embody moral and philosophical concerns that resonate with the modern Western tradition of liberal humanism and its core values: freedom, self-development, authenticity – values to which Holbrook's Shakespeare "is profoundly committed" (12), as, one is inclined to believe, is Holbrook himself. His extended essay proceeds from the assumption that Shakespeare "has significant things to say about permanent human problems" (22). Like many similar refashionings of Shakespeare in modern garb, the result is the confirmation of the author's own ~~most profound~~ convictions and commitments by means of ~~an unscrupulous-liberal~~ use of quotations from (almost) all of the plays and the poetry, usually without ~~any~~ regard for their context or dramatic

motivation. Holbrook's modern Shakespeare is not postmodern: he is a Shakespeare informed by readings of Montaigne, Kierkegaard, Emerson and, above all, Nietzsche. The radical, often libertarian individualism of these thinkers (and, by extension, Shakespeare's) might appear somewhat out of place in what the author refers to as today's more streamlined, conformist "regime of networked tyranny" (p. 66). One of the more surprising, and most engagingly written, passages ~~in this rather rambling book~~ is its enlisting of Michel Houellebecq – who receives lavish, though somewhat blurbish praise as "one of the most ambitious and serious of contemporary novelists" (62) – in the cause of defending the claim, identified as that of *Hamlet*, "that the human being is not an animal and deserves freedom rather than slavery" (66). This may sound old-fashioned to those committed to 'animal studies' and other fashionable academic concerns with 'identity politics'; it may come as a surprise to see it linked to Houellebecq's novels. ~~But~~ the real problem with such claims is not whether they are timely or outmoded, or whether one agrees or disagrees ~~to~~ with their propositional content, but their attribution to Shakespeare. Moreover, this and similar claims are so general as to be applicable to almost any literary work in the Western tradition, from the *Oresteia* to – well, come to think of it, perhaps not quite McEwan's *Saturday*, but certainly his *Atonement*. Holbrook's cause may be noble, ~~but~~ but one does not need to be a historicist, old or new, to balk at the insouciance with which he elides the distance between the Shakespearean texts and (his version of) Shakespeare's central beliefs. For Holbrook, there is no difference, and Shakespeare's beliefs happen to be his own. This is one of the most blatant attempts at hijacking Shakespeare for a (good?) cause that has come to my attention. Readers ~~unwilling to waste their time on this, yet~~ looking for a more persuasive reconciliation between 'historicism' and 'modernism', should turn to Stephen Greenblatt's own *Shakespeare's Freedom* (2010), a short book that has grown out of his Adorno Lectures in Frankfurt and the Campbell Lectures at Rice University. In what may amount to his best work since the 1980s, Greenblatt in this book deftly avoids the pitfalls of describing Renaissance 'individualism' in modern terms. Instead, he investigates the historic limits that shaped and enabled Shakespeare's "particular freedom" (1). Greenblatt is interested "in the ways that Shakespeare establishes and explores the boundaries that hedge about the claims of the absolute" (3-4), and he analyzes these in four paradigmatic areas: beauty, negation, authority, autonomy. The result of this investigation is a powerful, highly readable book that manages to connect abstract ideas, historical analysis and literary

reading in newly illuminating ways, while no longer explicitly invoking the textuality of history or similar old saws of the new historicism. Greenblatt tentatively and suggestively defines a Shakespearean aesthetics of imperfection and excess (“refusal to stay within fixed boundaries”, Greenblatt calls this on p. 45), even of “pleasure” (99). Nevertheless, he is also aware of a darker side to this more feudal/aristocratic than early bourgeois aesthetics of pleasure, a side that he traces in *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*, which are much more concerned with the limits pleasures of freedom than its pleasures. Finally, he points out the difference between the freedom to dream, as extolled in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the freedom from being sentenced for a crime committed (in the epilogue to *The Tempest*). In this distinction, he detects a shift from a claim of aesthetic autonomy to an increasingly skeptical attitude about the costs involved in such a claim. In stark contrast to Holbrook’s, Greenblatt’s Shakespeare is not much of an ‘individualist’ in the end, and less modern than one might like to admit.

Also aiming at the topic of individualism in the age of Shakespeare, but with a narrower gauge, is Jill Phillips Ingram’s *Idioms of Self-Interest: Credit, Identity, and Property in English Renaissance Literature*. Employing the concept of ‘idiom’ or ‘language’ as developed in the Cambridge school of the history of political thought (most notably by J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner), Ingram’s “literary archaeology” (2) identifies and analyzes a set of “competing vocabularies” (2) of self-interest in early modern England. One such idiom, central to the book, is that of ‘credit’, a very rich semantic field that combines financial with personal and communal dimensions. In the wake of historicist scholars like Katharine Eisaman Maus and Theodore Levin, Ingram identifies “the points of strain” (43) between traditional and emerging meanings of such idioms that bridge the economic and the moral. For her, the values connected with self-interest are not timeless but historical and imbricated in a “language of self-assertion” (11) accessible to a literary analysis that combines close reading of texts, understood as “a type of social action” (11), with historical evidence. Her key argument is that the Renaissance saw a cultural shift towards the acceptability of economic individualism, achieving a “rhetorical redescription” (12, quoting Skinner) of prodigality into liberality. She pursues this shift in perceptive and insightful readings of a wide range of texts: *Eastward Ho*, *Timon of Athens*, *The New Atlantis*, the poetry of Isabella Whitney and Aemilia Lanyer, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The chapters ~~could~~can be read as independent

essays but form a coherent line of argument. On the one hand, Ingram's Shakespeare seems to endorse a nostalgic view of paternalism, which tragically breaks down in *Timon*; on the other hand, he "celebrates resourceful social climbers like Bassanio" in the *Merchant* (115), registering the culture's increasing acceptance of risk-taking and venture capital. At times, Ingram's readings are threatened by a ~~rather unsubtle~~certain economic reductionism, which makes the objects of her investigation sound almost like hard-working modern Americans striving for a credit-line increase. Yet she avoids the all-too-easy shortcut from the depiction of usury in the *Merchant* to the biographical evidence of Shakespeare as entrepreneur and moneylender, opting instead for a stimulating scrutiny of the ways in which the texts resonate with the 'idiomatic' contexts of their time of origin. Also, her focus is not exclusively Shakespearean, which results in a wider perspective on Elizabethan and Jacobean discussions of credit and self-interest.

Yet by far the most stimulating contribution to the current revival or re-investigation of 'self-fashioning' is the collection of essays edited by Ute Berns under the heading of *Solo Performances*. Based on a conference in the context of the ~~already~~-almost legendary Berlin ~~'special research area'~~Collaborative Research Centre on performance and the performative element in culture, this collection assembles sixteen international scholars in the field of early modern English studies, all concerned with the performative element in fashioning and staging the individual self in the English Renaissance. Berns's highly useful introduction offers an excellent short summary of recent advances in the study of performance and performativity, explaining the book's perhaps unusual focus on 'solo performance' (which can range from the soliloquy to textual performances of selfhood in the poetry of John Donne, or the public shaming of John Lilburne) rather than the communal or social aspects of staging the self. Unfortunately, not all contributors have cared to follow Berns's lead; for some, the performative dimension of culture simply merges with a well-worn exploration of rhetoric, i.e. the close reading of texts (see, e.g., Wolfgang Müller's essay on "The Poem as Performance", and compare this with the essay that follows on its heels, Margret Fetzner's ~~truly~~-illuminating analysis of "Theatrical Performativity in Donne"). The volume is also a meeting-ground of different scholarly generations and national styles, and thus also informative on an academic meta-level. Only one of the essays is co-authored, the others are highly individual solo performances; each contributes a valuable aspect to the topic. Shakespeareans ~~who are~~-pressed for time

should read Manfred Pfister's foreword and Berns's introduction. I wager that it will be in their self-interest also to read the essays by [Andreas](#) Mahler and [Roger](#) Lüdeke, [Margret](#) Fetzer, and Richard Wilson, whose wily and provocative remarks on "Shakespeare's Cameo Performances" (in fact about the sovereignty of authorship and the disdain for print culture in Shakespeare's plays) are not to be missed. Ingram's and Berns's books not only attest to the lasting influence of the new historicist notion of self-fashioning; they cast new light on the spot where we would so much like to locate 'the individual' in Shakespeare and other Renaissance writers, but where we are inevitably confronted with the images we have produced ourselves.

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Met opmaak: Rechts