

# Crossing the Border: Shakespeare Biography, Academic Celebrity, and the Reception of *Will in the World*

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## Abstract

The publication in late 2004 of a new biography of Shakespeare — *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, by the influential Harvard professor Stephen Greenblatt — elicited a wide range of reviews in popular and academic journals. Many reviewers found much to admire in the book, while others found very little to recommend. The most sharply negative reviews tended to appear in academic journals, where the expectation seems to have been that *Will in the World* should have been another instance of Greenblatt's new historicist work. Instead, the biography relies on conventional biographical strategies, most notably the use of conjecture and supposition. Reviewers for popular journals were more positive, but still evinced anxiety about Greenblatt's portrait of Shakespeare as an ordinary person rather than a transcendent genius. The often conflicting reviews from popular critics, academics, and students expose the discourses of academic responsibility and of the difference between "right" and "wrong" Shakespeare that constitute the boundary in American culture between low culture or popular Shakespeare and high culture or academic Shakespeare. By crossing this boundary, Greenblatt's *Will in the World* demonstrates the power of academic celebrity to enable such a transgression.

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## Looking for William

Toward the middle of *Looking for Richard* (Pacino 1996), Al Pacino's documentary film about performing Shakespeare's *Richard III*, he and his acting company are trying to understand Lady Anne's motives in consenting to marry Richard in 1.2. They offer many theories, but none garners much enthusiasm. Finally, Pacino suggests that they ask a scholar. One of his collaborators, Frederic Kimball, shouts his opposition, claiming that as actors they are more qualified than scholars are to understand Shakespeare. Kimball is not angry because Pacino is reaffirming a border that lies between a popular sense of Shakespeare and an academic sense of Shakespeare: Kimball is angry because Pacino treats the border as hierarchical, with the scholars in the superior position

with superior knowledge. And because of their presumed superior knowledge of Shakespeare, scholars act as gatekeepers regulating the dissemination of that knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

By invoking the border, both Kimball and Pacino acknowledge a division over Shakespeare's place in American culture that, according to Lawrence Levine, dates back to the end of the nineteenth century. For Levine, the bifurcation of Shakespeare into high culture (academic) and low culture (popular) was coincident with the emergence of high culture and low culture generally (Levine 1988). Levine's model has been reiterated by, among others, Kim C. Sturges (2004) and extended by Michael Bristol (1990, 1997). Other scholars have modified the two-camp conception. Alan Sinfield (1994, 264-65) argues that the border emerged much earlier than Levine proposes, as do others (Uricchio and Pearson 1993, 65-110). Richard Burt (1998) suggests that the hierarchy is no longer as operative as it was and that the border is actually porous. He shows how elements of popular culture Shakespeare have colonized the academic side and, by extension, reversed the traditional direction of influence. No longer seeing themselves as the sole authority over Shakespeare, according to Burt, academics have increasingly been crossing the border to draw on popular culture to inform their scholarship. Although this type of work is increasingly accepted, especially in film and media studies, it was not long ago that the study of Shakespeare and popular culture was seen as an uncomfortable linking of literature and kitsch. Douglas Lanier provides another perspective on the border in his survey of what he terms "modern popular culture." He sees the relationship between the high and the popular as transactional, but disputed:

Shakespeare's appearances in pop culture typically involve interplay between two cultural systems — high and pop culture — that operate in parallel realms, two bodies of reference, sets of cultural institutions, canons of aesthetic standards, modes of constructing cultural authority. . . . But at [that interplay's] heart is a contest for authority between the two cultural systems and the institutional interests they represent. (Lanier 2002, 16)

For Donald Hedrick, the relationship is oppositional, where high culture's authority over Shakespeare "is regarded . . . as something against which to rebel or resist," citing as an example the publication of *Shakespeare for Dummies* (Doyle and Lischner 1999), "which actually does what academic introductions have always done, . . . but for a target audience that eschews 'academic' identity" (Hedrick 2002, 37).

The academic Shakespeare/popular Shakespeare binary that was so useful for Levine has thus become less and less functional as a description of the status of Shakespeare in American culture. We can still speak of a divide between academic and popular Shakespeare, but accurately characterizing the constituencies of either side and tracing the ways in which the divide is crossed

is increasingly difficult. Academic readers of Shakespeare, such as most of the readers of this journal, can be expected to approach a biography skeptically, bringing to the text a knowledge of the biographer's background, the publisher's reputation, other approaches to the subject, and the politics of academic writing. As figures of authority and disseminators of knowledge, they would regard reading a biography of Shakespeare with a sense of duty or responsibility. But this same population may also apply their knowledge and training to the production and study of aspects of the popular such as films, television programs, and comic books.

Readers who might be considered, for the purposes of this article, consumers of popular Shakespeare are a more heterogeneous population about which it is, if anything, still more difficult to generalize. Popular readers of a biography of Shakespeare desire factual information about the subject and his work. They may be wary readers, but have less specific knowledge about Shakespeare as an academic field or about biography as a discourse. More than academics, popular readers might look at a biography of Shakespeare as providing access to Shakespeare's cultural capital. Thus, these readers may not read critically, but rather for information that they can deploy as evidence of their cultural knowledge. They would read less out of a sense of duty than a sense of opportunity.

Indeed, many readers are difficult to place on either side of the binary. Are the students and faculty of a university's drama department academic or popular readers? A novelist, screenwriter, or playwright seeking to create a work about Shakespeare would be a careful and cautious reader, but would he or she be considered academic? How would an academic read a Shakespeare biography if he were interested in its popular reception? Where do high school teachers of Shakespeare fit in? They have academic training and are concerned with educating critical citizens, but to what extent do they approach a Shakespeare biography as a source of information or as one aspect of an immense discourse about Shakespeare?

Exploring these distinctions is an important task that needs to occupy a more central place in Shakespeare scholarship. But to pursue these questions would be beyond the scope of this article. For the sake of clarity, here I use the terms academic Shakespeare and popular Shakespeare not to describe two positions that represent discrete practices of readers, but rather to highlight the investment in maintaining a sense of difference between popular and academic readers.

As Pacino's and Kimball's positions (as advocates of the scholar's Shakespeare and the actor's Shakespeare, respectively) demonstrate and as Burt, Hedrick, and Lanier suggest, when writers cross the border between high culture and popular culture, they expose the assumptions that constitute that border, triggering anxieties on both sides of the divide. Pacino assumes the accuracy of a scholar's knowledge of Shakespeare, angering Kimball because it reminds him

of the importance culture places on higher education and the neglect of popular approaches to Shakespeare. Burt describes how scholars are looking to popular culture, such as film and television, as a means to advance their scholarship, and suggests that academics might have something to learn from popular culture, something that causes anxieties in academics and the general public alike, as Pacino and Kimball demonstrate and as will be seen below.

### Will in Whose World?

Given the mutual investment in the border between high culture Shakespeare and popular culture Shakespeare, what happens when a successful effort is made to cross that border? If Burt has shown how elements of the popular can colonize the academic, what happens when the academic attempts to colonize the popular via popular, rather than via traditional, academic means? In this article, I propose some answers to these questions through a study of the publication and reception of Stephen Greenblatt's 2004 biography of Shakespeare, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (Greenblatt 2004a). By tracing the reception of Greenblatt's book through book reviews in popular and academic venues, analyzing the book's marketing campaign, and referring to my own classroom experiences, I demonstrate how ownership over Shakespeare is contested both inside and outside the academy in ways that serve to re-establish the familiar high/popular boundary. By using his academic reputation, Greenblatt attempts to cross the boundary and to extend his influence into the general public. While some readers understand Greenblatt's attempt to cross the line between academic and popular Shakespeare as a valuable contribution to public knowledge of Shakespeare, others experience it as a betrayal of his academic responsibilities as the founder of new historicism and a teacher of Shakespeare.

As a biography of Shakespeare written by an academic and ambiguously positioned as both an academic and a popular biography, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* straddles a boundary, allowing academic and popular reviewers to see the book as academic, popular, or sometimes both at the same time. Greenblatt's reputation as an academic celebrity with a history of ground-breaking work on Shakespeare and early modern literature created expectations that *Will in the World* would be another example of this type of scholarship. Yet the non-academic form of the book and the non-academic marketing campaign by W. W. Norton suggest a more general audience. These contradictory categorizations help to reveal some of the foundational issues at stake on the border between high and popular Shakespeare. In particular, the vociferous and divided reception of *Will in the World* shows how the question of "right" Shakespeare versus "wrong" Shakespeare and the implicit responsibilities and expectations of being an academic celebrity shape academic engagement with Shakespeare.

I roughly divided contemporaneous reviews collected during the book's initial publication into those intended for academic readers (for journals such as *Shakespeare Quarterly*) and those intended for a broader audience (for newspapers and magazines such as *The New Yorker*). Some periodicals, such as *The Times Literary Supplement (TLS)* and *The New York Review of Books (NYR)*, arguably complicate this division. In such cases, I place greater emphasis on the profession of the writer of the review. Writers such as Peter Holland or Alistair Fowler, although writing for a comparatively broad readership in *NYR* and *TLS*, nevertheless approach the task as academics and were presumably recruited because of their status as such. Along with the reviews, I monitored the marketing for *Will in the World*, including advertising in the *New York Times Book Review*, interviews with Greenblatt on radio and television, the book's status on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and the displays at bookstores and the Modern Language Association's book exhibit at the 2004 annual conference. Surveyed and described, this information reveals how Greenblatt and his publisher represented the book and author to popular and academic audiences and suggests how those audiences reacted. Finally, I draw on my own experiences reading *Will in the World* and using it in a Shakespeare class. I do this to remind the reader and myself that I am not a neutral observer of the debates over Shakespeare. I am a participant, an academic writing an article for an academic venue. This involvement in my subject matter becomes more important later in this article, when questions of academic responsibility and "right" Shakespeare and "wrong" Shakespeare become apparent.

### Beginning

Late in the summer of 2004, I was preparing the reading list for a graduate Shakespeare seminar I was scheduled to teach the following spring. In order to present Shakespeare as a historically centered writer and challenge the construction of him as a transcendent universal genius, I decided to include a biography. I imagined that a good biography, several of which had appeared in the past ten years, would be a way to introduce the study of Shakespeare to students and to present historical and cultural information about early modern England. Looking forward to going through the recent biographies, I saw an advertisement for a new one by Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, to be published by W. W. Norton. As I have always enjoyed Greenblatt's work on Shakespeare (who better to provide a new historicist approach?) and had used it in the classroom, I figured my decision was made, and I contacted my Norton representative for a copy.

My secondary motive was an interest in the place of Shakespeare in American culture and the role of academics in determining how Shakespeare is produced and consumed. I was familiar with the standard two-camp model, as noted above. But I was curious to learn more about the dynamics

of border crossing, either from the popular to the academic or from the other direction. I felt that I knew my position as regards the divide. As I am a professor in a university English department, my authority as a Shakespeare expert is rarely questioned. The introductory Shakespeare courses fill to capacity with students who are intimidated and intrigued by the study of Shakespeare and who are counting on me to help them access his works. In addition, I felt that I had a responsibility to give my students an academically rigorous picture of Shakespeare — dispelling myths and contextualizing facts — similar to the one I had been exposed to as a student. This feeling was amplified by the fact that most of my students taught undergraduates and intended to become professors themselves. Ideally, because of their recent entry into the academy and their own responsibilities as teachers, the students would be able to speak to the questions of public and academic claims on Shakespeare from both sides of the classroom.

During the semester prior to the class, I started to read *Will in the World* and noticed that reviews of the book began appearing in somewhat surprising venues: *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Time Magazine*, *The Economist*, *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. Clearly, the book was making a splash beyond the regular venues of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*. Contributors to the online discussion group SHAKSPER also began showing interest in the book, following its reception in a great range of publications in the U.S. and Great Britain. My copy, although a first edition, was already from the second printing, despite having arrived in October, only a few weeks after the official publication date. The book itself felt appropriately hefty, and its design — with a large engraving of Shakespeare and gold, white, and black colors — resembled ever so slightly a one-hundred dollar bill. The back-cover blurbs were from poet Robert Pinsky; British actor and director Tina Packer; Stanley Wells, co-editor of the Complete Oxford Shakespeare, Chair of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, author himself of a Shakespeare biography, and emeritus professor of Shakespeare at University of Birmingham; history professor Natalie Zemon Davis; and British stage actor Simon Russell Beale, who describes the book as "a love letter to a man whom we will never get to know" (quoted in Greenblatt 2004a, back cover). *Will in the World* was plainly not like Greenblatt's prior work, meant for a comparatively small scholarly audience; instead, it was being marketed as a blockbuster popular work with testimonials from actors and scholars. Recognizing my own interest in this cultural mix, I decided that I would keep track of the book's reception. I thought the wide range of reviews would offer an opportunity to approach questions of public and academic claims on Shakespeare that I hoped to introduce in the next semester's class. I imagined that some of the reviews, most likely those in newspapers and magazines would be written by non-academics and that the reviews in journals and quarterlies

would be written by academics with an expertise in Shakespeare. And because the biography was written by a scholar of Greenblatt's reputation, I imagined the academic reviewers would be notable Shakespearians.

### Initial Reviews

*Will in the World* was indeed being reviewed in a great variety of publications. *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews* had given it mainly positive early reviews in July, although both journals expressed reservations that Greenblatt's tendency to speculate might put off general readers, a criticism that would occur regularly (Gold 2004; Review, *Kirkus Reviews* 2004). An interview with Sarah Gold accompanying the *Publishers Weekly* review allowed Greenblatt to explain his motives: a desire to write something that would appeal to the larger public and his belief that biography would be the best genre for that goal. *Library Journal* recommended the book for public libraries, but suggested that Michael Wood's *Shakespeare* (2003) was more fully documented and useful for students and scholars (Fair 2004, 76). John Leonard, in the September *Harper's*, gave the book a brief and laudatory review, focusing on the portrayal of Shakespeare as a social climber and calling the book "delightful" and Greenblatt the "Johnny Appleseed of iambs" (2004, 85). Soon after, *The New Yorker* printed Adam Gopnik's positive review (Gopnik 2004). Summarizing the book at length, Gopnik admires Greenblatt's engagement with the genre, writing that his connection between Robert Greene and the character of Falstaff "is a triumph of biographical criticism" (92). More specifically, Gopnik praises Greenblatt's use of speculation because of its lack of certainties, claiming, "Good biographical criticism dissolves determinisms, and replaces them not with gossipy puzzle-solution certainties but with glimpses of life as it is lived, and art as it is made" (93). This train of thought concludes with a brief discussion of Greenblatt's final chapter on the ordinariness of Shakespeare, "The Every Day Life." For Greenblatt, Shakespeare is persistently a quotidian figure who seems to have intentionally constructed a low-profile existence. Gopnik emphasizes this notion not because it attempts to deprive Shakespeare of the status of genius, but because it makes him much more a part of "our company" (95).

The book was scheduled for release on September 30, 2004. Newspaper reviews appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Chicago Sun-Times*. They all identify Greenblatt as a Harvard professor and Shakespeare scholar and voice concern over his speculation, but found much to admire in the book for both popular and academic audiences. The first day of October brought an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that reviewed the book and interviewed Greenblatt, as well as Stanley Wells and Robert S. Miola, professor of English at Loyola College,

Maryland (Byrne 2004). Wells, who had provided a blurb for the book, thought highly both of it and of Greenblatt. More than just a review, the article contextualizes the biography in terms of new historicism, Greenblatt's career as the founder of new historicism, and the problems of Greenblatt's critical approach. Explicitly more anxious about Greenblatt's use of conjecture than earlier, mainstream reviewers, the article quotes Greenblatt's defense of his imagined meeting between Shakespeare and the Catholic recusant priest Edmund Campion as "the moment of the book that's the most implausible . . . the wildest leap" (Byrne 2004, A18). The moment is important for Greenblatt's approach to Shakespeare, though, because it provides an explanation for the lack of religious fanaticism in Shakespeare's plays.

*The New York Times* gave *Will in the World* triple attention, providing an excerpt in the Sunday magazine (September 12), a mixed-favorable review by cultural critic Michiko Kakutani — who saw it as more biography than literary criticism, "very much aimed at the lay reader and nonacademic Shakespeare fan" (2004, E2) — and a full treatment by Irish novelist Colm Tóibín in the *Book Review* two days later. Tóibín's review, sensitive to the difficulties of writing biography, shows discomfort with Greenblatt's method, the Campion episode in particular, and actually refers to the book as "an attempt at a biography" and "pure foolishness" (2004, 23). He oddly concludes on a positive note, admiring Greenblatt's ability to "merge his gifts as a literary critic and scholar with his instincts as a biographer" (23). Included in the same issue as Tóibín's review was a full-page advertisement for *Will in the World* featuring blurbs from *Time*, *The Economist*, and Gopnik's *New Yorker* review. In the lower left corner of the ad, Greenblatt's dramatic, black and white book jacket photo peers out of the page.

The initial British reviews appeared shortly after, two each on the ninth and tenth of October. The first fellow biographer of Shakespeare to publish a review, Katherine Duncan-Jones, professor of English language and literature at Somerville College, Oxford gives it a sympathetic, if mixed, reception. Assessing the book's strengths and weaknesses, Duncan-Jones writes, "*Will in the World* combines a good deal of insight and sensitivity with a strangely uncritical mish-mash of ideés fixes and nonsense" (2004, 54). Gary Taylor, co-editor of the Complete Oxford Shakespeare, author of many books on Shakespeare, and then-director of the Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies at Alabama, wrote a sometimes impish review for *The Guardian*. Referring to Greenblatt as "the world's most influential Shakespearean for more than a quarter of a century," he suggests that Greenblatt received a million-dollar advance for the book before noting that in America the book "has been greeted . . . as an epochal achievement" (Taylor 2004, 9). Never wholly dismissing the book, Taylor uses the trope of the story as his conceit, repeatedly invoking the idea of fiction: "What matters is not the true story, but a good story" (9). After pointing out a number of passages



that annoy him particularly, Taylor retreats a bit by writing that it is "not polite to complain about improbabilities and inaccuracies in other people's love letters" (9).

The second review by a fellow biographer of Shakespeare, University of Liverpool professor Jonathan Bate, appeared in the Sunday *Telegraph*. The review is initially positive, identifying Greenblatt as "America's most admired literary critic" (2004, 12), giving a brief biography of the author, and repeating the rumor that the book's advance was a million dollars. Placing Greenblatt in the tradition of Victorian biographers who sought biographical details to explain Shakespeare's plays, Bate sharply corrects a number of Greenblatt's contentions. One he singles out is Greenblatt's suggestion that Shakespeare had seen "sharp-quilled porcupines" (Greenblatt 2004a, 41-42) as a boy in Stratford. Bate points out that porcupines are not native to the British Isles, though Queen Elizabeth may have had one in her menagerie.

The next American review is almost diametrically opposite to Leonard's and Gopnik's; essayist Cristina Nehring (2004) in *The Atlantic* finds the biography flawed at best because it spends too much time on details and not enough on the man. Though she identifies Greenblatt as the "founder and leader" of new historicism, which is "probably the most influential school of literary criticism in America," Nehring writes that *Will in the World* "ultimately proves an expression of academic fashion more than a study of genius" (2004, 130, 132). Greenblatt's depiction of Shakespeare as an ordinary man rankles Nehring. His method "turns gold into lead . . . takes texts of universal appeal and authors of individual genius and reduces them to catalogues of culturally particular — and contemporarily irrelevant — minutiae" (134). Her strongest critique challenges Greenblatt's conception of Falstaff as a dislikeable figure, one based on the self-destructive Greene. For Nehring, Falstaff is a lovable, "life-affirming and humane" (131) character rather than Greenblatt's dissolute, drunken disappointment to Prince Hal.

On October 13, *Will in the World* was nominated for the National Book Award. On the seventeenth of October, *Will in the World* showed up on the *New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list, where it would appear for nine more weeks. The October 21 issue of the *The New York Review of Books* printed an excerpt of the chapter on *Hamlet*. On the twenty-sixth, Georgetown English professor Maureen Corrigan offered her positive review on the National Public Radio program *Fresh Air* (Corrigan 2004). Three weeks prior to reviewing the book, *The Washington Post* printed an article and interview with Greenblatt that was conducted at the Folger Shakespeare Library, replete with copies of Shakespeare folios and quartos pulled out for the occasion. The interview portrays Greenblatt as "eager-eyed" and bubbly with excitement at the opportunity to look through the Folger holdings (Weeks 2004, C01). Speaking as a Shakespeare authority, he read aloud from *The Tempest*, rejected the theory that someone else wrote Shakespeare's plays, characterized the

bard as a rebel, and concluded, somewhat ironically for a biographer, that "the real magic lies not in the man, but in the work" (quoted in Weeks 2004, C01).

### Reading *Will in the World*

By the time I had read all these reviews, I had also completed my first reading of the book. I shared the reviewers' general concern with Greenblatt's use of speculation and conjecture, although, as many of them pointed out, writing a biography of such a distant figure, regardless of the quantity of factual information available, inevitably involves some amount of inference. Creating a narrative out of static data requires gaps to be filled and suppositions to be made. Perhaps because of my expectation that the sort of biography that Greenblatt would write would correspond with his prior new historicist work, I felt uncomfortable with his conjectural technique. The first paragraph of the book begins:

Let us imagine that Shakespeare found himself from boyhood fascinated by language, obsessed with the magic of words. There is overwhelming evidence for this obsession from his earliest writings, so it is a very safe assumption that it began early, perhaps from the first moment his mother whispered a nursery rhyme in his ear: "Pillycock, pillycock, sate on a hill, / If he's not gone — he sits there still." (This particular nursery rhyme was rattling around in his brain years later, when he was writing *King Lear*. "Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill," chants the madman Poor Tom [*King Lear* 3.4.73].) He heard things in the sounds of words that others did not hear; he made connections that others did not make; and he was flooded with a pleasure all his own. (Greenblatt 2004a, 23)

No deception is being practiced here; Greenblatt is engaging in imaginative writing, and he is asking his readers to be complicit. The second line cites the existence of evidence for his contention and assumes that we all agree that Shakespeare was "fascinated by language." This seems fair enough. The next few sentences extend the technique. Using lines from *King Lear*, Greenblatt suggests that Shakespeare first heard them from his mother during infancy. An easy enough supposition, but no more likely than his hearing them as an adult on the streets of London, or spoken by his wife, Anne Hathaway, to his own children. The final contention returns to the rhetoric of the first, that we all agree about Shakespeare's unique engagement with language. Bate initially calls this paragraph "wonderful stuff" but goes on to observe that, based on Greenblatt's previous scholarship, he would have expected discussion of the sexual connotations of the rhyme and their importance to *King Lear* (Bate 2004, 12).

As mentioned earlier, the section that seemed to concern most reviewers describes an imaginary meeting between Shakespeare and the Jesuit priest and eventual martyr Edmund Campion. The section is part of "Chapter Three: The Great Fear," which begins with the hypothesis that Shakespeare's lost years were spent working for a recusant Catholic family in Lancashire.<sup>2</sup> The section continues to sketch out the religious tensions in Elizabethan England, touching on John Shakespeare's possible Catholicism and the "double consciousness" of those who publicly behaved as Protestants but retained a devotion to Catholicism. About twenty pages into the chapter, Greenblatt begins to present his extended conjectures about Campion's life alongside those about Shakespeare: "The moment that Will is likely to have sojourned [in Lancashire] is precisely the moment that the Jesuit Campion headed in the same direction," he begins (Greenblatt 2004a, 106). From here, Greenblatt presents Campion's biography and the difficulties of his mission in England. According to Greenblatt, while hiding at houses of Catholics, Campion

would sit up half the night hearing confessions, trying to resolve moral dilemmas, dispensing advice. Was one of those with whom he exchanged whispered words the young man from Stratford-upon-Avon?

Let us imagine the two of them sitting together then, the sixteen-year-old fledgling poet and actor and the forty-year-old Jesuit. Shakespeare would have found Campion fascinating . . . and might even have recognized in him something of a kindred spirit.

. . .

[W]hether he actually met Campion in person or only heard about him . . . Will may have registered a powerful inner resistance as well as admiration. (108, 109-10)

Greenblatt suggests that Shakespeare's meeting with Campion might have turned the playwright away from heroic figures of ideological endeavors. As a result, Shakespeare's heroic characters tend not to be virtuous religious ideologues, but heroic in other ways. Greenblatt notes that Joan of Arc is burnt as a witch, Henry VI is saintly but weak, and Angelo from *Measure for Measure* is corrupt. Greenblatt is honest, though, reminding us at the end of the section that the previous fifteen pages have been built around a conjecture: "What this suggests is that if he actually saw Campion in 1581 Shakespeare would even then probably have shuddered and recoiled inwardly, pulling away from the invitation . . . to shoulder the cross and join in a pious struggle for the Catholic faith" (113).

Plainly, this is not the methodology of a scholarly book. Greenblatt's hypothesis and conjecture make for engaging reading. Yet as with the hypothetical meetings of Shakespeare, Jonson, and

company at the Mermaid Tavern, it can be no more than speculation, fruit for conversation and debate. The conclusion Greenblatt makes from his construction of Shakespeare's reaction to a conjectural meeting with Campion is compelling. It accounts for the lack of saintly, heroic figures in Shakespeare's plays, just as the existence of the meetings at the Mermaid accounts for the tavern's mention in Jonson's plays. Greenblatt's speculations are not mere flights; they demonstrate his learning and ability to communicate that learning with ease. The section on Campion presents valuable information about the tensions that surrounded Shakespeare's life during the Elizabethan era. It perhaps goes too far, however, when it builds a cause-and-effect relationship with insufficient factual support. In his review, John Simon, theater and film critic and essayist for *The New Criterion*, is blunt about the relationship between Greenblatt's use of supposition and his status. Simon writes that "If a conjecture is developed in great detail . . . and if the author is the Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard, as well as the editor of the Norton Shakespeare and the author of a number of books . . . nothing is easier than to fall under its sway" (Simon 2005, 70). He suggests that Greenblatt's ethos as a biographer of Shakespeare resides more in his academic reputation than in the content of his book or his methodological approach.

Where the methodology gave me pause, what concerned me more, as it did Simon, is the book's comparative lack of critical apparatus. No footnotes are provided, although each chapter receives several pages of endnotes, directing readers to particular books and essays relevant to the particular topics in that chapter. While helpful, the density and formality of citations that are important to a scholarly book are simply lacking. *Will in the World* was not exactly the scholarly biography I had hoped to have my students read. It presents facts and historical information, but it also uses that material to generate conclusions that are not factual. I worried that the book might give the students ideas about Shakespeare that, while perhaps not entirely wrong, might prove misleading.

*Will in the World*, however, does many things quite well that tipped my decision in favor of using it. Greenblatt's style is accessible and clear. He articulates particularly well the conception of "strategic opacity" (Greenblatt 2004a, 327-29), Shakespeare's deliberately obscuring of some of his characters' motives in order to achieve richer characterization and veracity. And he carefully demythologizes Shakespeare. I assigned the book, deciding to use my concerns over conjecture and the limited scholarly apparatus as a means of engaging with Shakespeare and with Greenblatt's text.

The publisher's treatment of the biography confirmed my sense that it was not entirely a scholarly work. When I contacted the bookstore, I was taken aback to learn that, despite the book's popularity, Norton had no plans for a paperback edition. This puzzled me. Common practice for popular books would dictate that a paperbound version of a bestseller be issued, often after the holidays. Scholarly books, on the other hand, intended only for library shelves often remain in hard

cover. But Greenblatt is unique in that most of his earlier and unequivocally scholarly books had been printed in paperback, so it seemed that *Will in the World* was regarded by its publisher as different from Greenblatt's earlier books (although Norton did print a paperbound edition in the fall of 2005).

### The Second Wave of Reviews

In the meantime, I continued to track the reception and promotion of *Will in the World*. The next three reviews were all written by academics: John Carey, emeritus professor of English at Oxford, author of several books on John Donne, and co-editor of *The Poems of John Milton* with Alastair Fowler, writing in the London Sunday *Times*; film and literature professor at Exeter and the University of Pittsburgh Colin MacCabe, writing in the London *Independent*; and Arthur Kirsch, American emeritus professor of English from the University of Virginia and author and editor of several books on Shakespeare, writing in *The Washington Post Book World*. All three reviews are mixed, admiring Greenblatt's learning and his attempt at such a difficult task. In now familiar terms, they all find the book's methodologies to be more Victorian or Romantic than twenty-first century or postmodern. All three follow this charge with criticism of new historicism in general or as practiced by Greenblatt. Carey finds factual errors and writes that the book "would seem, to any self-respecting 1980s new historicist, so old-fashioned as to be feeble-witted" but, contradictorily, "probably the best one-volume life of Shakespeare yet" (2004, 50). MacCabe finds that "Historicising Shakespeare in relation to a new masculinity doesn't seem to occur to [Greenblatt] . . . . Partly, no doubt . . . because any ambitious professor on a US campus would find it embarrassing to talk of Shakespeare's despairing misogyny" (2004, 26). Kirsch begins by referring to the book's method as representative of "the so-called new historicism" and finds its use in a biography of Shakespeare too speculative, writing that "historical connections that can be illuminating . . . are just as often far-fetched . . ." (2004, T6). While he sees Greenblatt's method as conjectural and reductive, Kirsch concludes with a string of compliments and, sounding similar to Taylor, labels Greenblatt a "masterful storyteller" (T6).

On November 14, CSPAN's program *Booknotes* (Greenblatt 2004d) broadcast Brian Lamb's interview with Greenblatt. Lamb treated Greenblatt as a Shakespeare authority, asking him questions about the biography and about the place of Shakespeare in modern culture, the authorship question, and Greenblatt's own life as a scholar. Three days later, the winners of the National Book Awards were announced. Although *Will in the World* did not win, Renée Montagne on NPR's *Morning Edition* interviewed Greenblatt, where he confessed, "I speculate about everything in my book" (Greenblatt 2004c).

That same week one of the most negative reviews yet appeared in *The New Republic*, entitled "Bad Will Hunting" (Jenkyns 2004). A regular reviewer for *The New Republic*, *London Review of Books*, and *The New York Review of Books*, and a professor of classics at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, Richard Jenkyns begins by setting out the difficulties of writing a biography of a writer by using his or her literary output as an historical source. The body of the review acknowledges that *Will in the World* is well written and energetic before settling into the bulk of its argument: Greenblatt's "approach is highly subjective and easily self-fulfilling" (2004, 22). Jenkyns illustrates this point by disparaging Greenblatt's supposition that the image of a soldier's "thighs [pierced] with darts" like the "sharp-quilled porcupine" (*2 Henry VI*, 3.1.362-63) came from Shakespeare's youthful encounters with such creatures. As we now know, there were no porcupines in Stratford; Shakespeare probably got the image from a picture: "Yet much of the book is silly. It shows small understanding of how to weigh historical evidence; and its notion of the creative process, and of the relation between a writer's work and a writer's life, is naïve" (Jenkyns 2004, 22). Painstakingly going through the book, citing instances of conjecture and demonstrating the logical flaws inherent in Greenblatt's technique, and finally labeling the *Campion* episode "entirely Greenblatt's fiction. . . . an improbable fiction" (22), Jenkyns writes that Greenblatt's Shakespeare is not a great writer, but rather one "short of imagination" (23) and unread in the classical traditions of poetry and drama. Concluding his review, Jenkyns confesses that he learned from the biography, but that Greenblatt's method required him to suspend his doubt too much to rely on what he has learned.

Similar reservations appear in drama critic Fintan O'Toole's review, "A Comedy of Errors," which appeared in the *Irish Times*. O'Toole admires Greenblatt's earlier work, but finds the suppositions of *Will in the World* disappointing. He does help clarify some of the matter surrounding the porcupine, suggesting that, after someone made Greenblatt aware of the error, he had the British edition of *Will in the World* changed to read "as a country boy, he had almost certainly seen his share of spiny hedgehogs" (2004, 10). Significantly, he manages to turn the observation into a pointed commentary about how Greenblatt ignored "the obvious — Shakespeare wrote 'porcupine' because 'hedgehog' doesn't suit the rhythm of his verse and is too unheroic a word" (10).<sup>3</sup>

Given that the publication of *Will in the World* was a heavily-marketed media event, like the appearance of a new novel by Toni Morrison or a CD by Bruce Springsteen, I was not surprised to find evidence of a lecture tour. As part of this tour, Greenblatt stopped for an interview with Irene Lacher of the *Los Angeles Times* that was printed on 21 November. This article is one of the

first to address the emergent criticism of the book, beginning by contextualizing the biography, as Greenblatt does in his introduction, in terms of how acting as a consultant for the screenplay of *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden 1998) led Greenblatt to the project of a popular life of Shakespeare, "an escape hatch from the ivory tower" (Lacher 2004, E6). Greenblatt states, "The movie made me realize that you could interest a huge audience in what is fundamentally a literary question. . . . There is a slightly despairing sense of literary critics that they're addressing 38 people and that's it" (quoted in Lacher 2004, E6). Greenblatt appears for the most part untroubled by the criticisms of his method, saying it is "a weakness [of the book]. Inevitably, there's an enormous amount of both speculation and tact. . . . You have to be sensitive, careful and at the same time, daring and risk-taking" (quoted in Lacher 2004, E6).

On December 1, Greenblatt appeared on PBS's *Charlie Rose Show* (Greenblatt 2004e). In a method similar to the interview with Lamb, Rose mixed questions about Shakespeare's life with questions about Greenblatt's motivation and personal experiences. Speaking as a populist more than an academic, Greenblatt did not hesitate to invoke Shakespeare's genius and the persistent attraction of his works. He briefly acknowledged criticism of the book, but quickly moved on. In this one, as in all his interviews, Greenblatt comes across as persuasive, articulate, and eminently knowledgeable, without seeming condescending. His admiration for Shakespeare is evident, and, despite the contentions of *Will in the World*, Greenblatt seems willing to talk about Shakespeare as a transcendent genius.

For its review, the *New York Review of Books* enlisted Peter Holland, former director of the Shakespeare Institute at Stratford-upon-Avon and now the McMeel Chair of Shakespeare Studies at Notre Dame (2004, 34-38). The author of many books and articles about Shakespeare, including the entry for the new *Dictionary of National Biography*, Holland likes many elements of Greenblatt's book, especially the notion of strategic opacity. He is concerned, however, that a biography that uses Shakespeare's writings for source material limits readers' ability to read Shakespeare for themselves. For example, he thinks that the contention that the inspiration for Falstaff can be found in Robert Greene forecloses our ability either to enjoy the plays or to understand Shakespeare as a type of genius. What seems to disappoint Holland most, though, is that this method seems at odds with Greenblatt's earlier work, work that emphasized complexity and prompted readers to seek their own sense of the origins of Shakespeare's plays.

### Marketing and Teaching *Will in the World*

One of the most dramatic events of my *Will in the World* investigation, and one that continued to blur the distinction between the book's popular and academic audiences, was the 2004 Modern

Language Association Convention held at the end of December. The program for the meeting sent out in October contained a small advertisement for the book. In the book exhibit at the Norton booth, however, copies of *Will in the World* were piled up in pyramids similar to those that line the entries to Barnes and Noble and Borders, communicating through sheer volume of paper and ink the book's importance.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, a book signing was scheduled where people could meet Greenblatt, buy the book, and have it signed. Although I already had a copy and had read it, there was something absurdly compelling about the prospect of getting an autographed version so that during class one day I could accidentally let the book slip open and allow the students to see that Greenblatt had personally inscribed my copy.

I did not make it to the book signing, nor did anyone I know. The event did help me think about the cult of academic celebrity. I would not have been surprised to see that Greenblatt would be signing his book at the Barnes & Noble on Fifth Avenue or the flagship Borders in Ann Arbor, where the general public and academics would rub elbows. These are the places famous authors regularly visit to promote their books. At the MLA book exhibit, however, only scholars and academics would be there, people who (ideally) would value this book not for who wrote it, but for what it contained. Even more awkward would be the presence of hundreds (thousands?) of books by non-celebrity academics, written in order to achieve tenure or make a contribution to their fields. All these people want is for someone to buy their books, maybe read them, maybe review them, maybe even assign them in their classes. Greenblatt was beyond all this. He was promoted as a celebrity scholar inside the profession and promoted as a popular author outside the profession.

Toward the end of January, my students offered their first reactions to the book. Their comments were mainly positive. The concern that did surface was indeed over the high degree of supposition and conjecture. I shared my own concerns and then tried to frame the issue by asking if it was unethical for me to assign a biography of Shakespeare that so heavily relies on inference and assumption. In other words, should I as the instructor be worried about giving them "wrong" Shakespeare? I wish I could say that as I soon as I made this proposal, I realized the element of condescension in it. But I did not. After a few minutes of discussion, they gently reminded me that they were not the general public; they were skilled readers of texts and were able to recognize Greenblatt's rhetoric. I pursued the question, asking about their students or the general public: people who may not be skilled readers. In other words, a readable, accessible book by a noted scholar might be the only book on Shakespeare a person reads, forming his or her only notion of Shakespeare. The consensus seemed to be that for those inside the academy, students and professors, Greenblatt's book was not a problem. Yet readers outside the academy might learn



misleading or wrong information about Shakespeare, and, as members of the academy, we had a responsibility to correct any potentially misleading information.

### The Third Wave of Reviews

The reviews continued to appear in the new year of 2005. In his review for the *London Review of Books*, Colin Burrow, editor of the Oxford Edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and professor of English at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, shows distinct awareness of the tension between the popular and the academic when he writes that Greenblatt's book "seems designed to fulfil a number of market demands. The superstar critic dances out his desire for the megastar author . . . who wouldn't buy it? Who wouldn't long for the video?" (2005, 10). Burrow, as did Holland, helpfully contextualizes *Will in the World* in terms of earlier biographies, but sees it as the most imaginative, if not fictional, of them all. Perhaps having read earlier reviews, he quickly disposes of any porcupine anxiety by noting that only in the American version do "Porcupines stalk through the Forest of Arden." Greenblatt's method aside, Burrow finds the most compelling problem with the book to be generic:

What Greenblatt at one point in his career seemed well able to have provided is a cultural biography of Shakespeare, which would wean itself from the individuating anecdote, resist simple psychologising of the plays, break free of the constraints generated by the nature of the surviving evidence about Shakespeare's financial transactions, and think instead about the chaos of interacting connections that might underlie Shakespeare's work. Unfortunately, *Will in the World* is not that book. (11)

Burrow rather sees it as a literary biography, the sort of book

written for people who don't much fancy reading plays and want to be reassured that some of the superstitions they have about the relationship between human activities and social causality have some descriptive force. The explanations of literary activity which are required by the market for literary biography tend to be made up from a dash of Freud, a handful of social aspiration, a scratching from Foucault's armpit, and a willingness to entertain simple one-to-one correspondences between fiction and life. (11)

Burrow seems troubled by the book's apparent simultaneous appeal to academic and popular audiences, which ultimately turns the book into a non-academic, over-simplified disappointment. And perhaps worst of all, Greenblatt seems to be seen as pandering to a mass audience, "people who don't much fancy reading plays."

Early February brought the review I had been waiting for, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, written by Alastair Fowler, Regius Professor Emeritus of the University of Edinburgh, author of many books on English Renaissance poetry, and co-editor (with John Carey) of *The Poems of John Milton*. Fowler had written a memorably vicious review of Greenblatt's breakthrough book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), also for *TLS*. He makes his feelings for this recent one obvious in the first sentences: "*Will in the World* is a readable book about Shakespeare's life. What sort of book remains unclear — fact or fiction, criticism or history" (Fowler 2005a, 3). As the review progresses, it becomes apparent that for Fowler, the book is fiction and most certainly not history. He begins with a summary that, similar to Jenkyns's, pauses occasionally to comment on Greenblatt's factual and judgmental errors, including the acceptance of the authenticity of John Shakespeare's spiritual testament. The commentary becomes more and more pointed: "Greenblatt is not interested in consistency. . . . How absurd. Greenblatt's argument is without substance" (3). The litany of inaccuracies and charges of poor scholarship firmly demonstrate that Fowler finds not only the method, but also the research behind the book to be inadequate. He writes, "what most undermines confidence in his generalizations is their frequent inaccuracy. [Greenblatt] has only to state a fact or a figure to blur or falsify it" (4). Even the one element in *Will in the World* that other critics, negative and positive, found praise for, the idea of strategic opacity, is dismissed by Fowler. Fowler does not see this as innovative at all, asking the reader to recall whether any earlier drama provides motives: "Excision of motive was impossible: it wasn't there to excise. Greenblatt, with all his imagining, finds it hard to imagine a state of art or society other than his own" (4). The real vitriol comes at the end of the review, however, where Fowler returns to his concerns about history:

How did the intelligent Greenblatt come to write so sloppy a book? Almost all the factual errors could have been avoided by consulting a few reference books that wait on the shelves of every Renaissance scholar. Did he avoid looking these things up because he knew he was right? Or did he sit light to history in the hope his book would be filmed (*Shakespeare on the Run*)? Or was a more radical self-fashioning involved: a crossover into historical fiction? Such a move would not be ridiculous. One can admire the imagination with which he keeps false surmises going, against all evidence. As fiction, however, *Will in the World* is not an unmixed success either; its subject veers too much between Shakespeare's imagination and Stephen Greenblatt's own. Yet, as biography, it is not bookish enough, and shows contempt for its readers — as if toy history were good enough for them. (5)

This is just the sort of harangue that one hopes to find in the *TLS*, and I wondered if the argument would continue in the next issue on the letters page. And so it did, with Greenblatt's

writing in to challenge Fowler's charges of factual inaccuracies, eventually concluding with a "So what?" (Greenblatt 2005). He then reminds readers of Fowler's past "grotesque distortions." In the next issue, Fowler replies with his own statistics, confessing to exaggeration for the sake of making his point. He ends, however with a facetious apology: "I'm sorry to have given Stephen Greenblatt another bad notice. But he could have avoided that by learning, in the course of thirty years, at least a little British history" (Fowler 2005b, 17).

Fowler's review was by far the most negative and least willing to find anything admirable about the book or its author. The charges of inaccuracy are always important in judging the reliability of any writing, and I was surprised that Fowler either did not notice or chose not to engage with the presence of porcupines in England. What is more, Fowler himself made several errors in his review, the most egregious of which was mistaking *Twelfth Night* for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Similarly important are charges of faulty methodology or faulty conclusions. It is Fowler's persistent *ad hominem* means of communicating these charges, rather than the charges themselves, that remain with me. I felt as if, for Fowler, Greenblatt had committed some grave heresy and had to be persecuted for it.

## Conclusions

The more the class read of Greenblatt's book, the more the students came to like it. The emphasis on Shakespeare's ordinariness helped students to rethink their ideas about Shakespeare as a transhistorical genius. According to the students themselves, the great benefits of the book were the insights, such as the notion of strategic opacity, it provided into the plays we were reading. Yet when we returned to the question of the boundary between the popular and the academic, and our responsibility as academics, there was less consensus than before. Some were concerned about the elitism inherent in academic mediation of Shakespeare, feeling that people should read Shakespeare for themselves. Others felt unmediated access remained problematic, an issue that became apparent during a class trip to a performance of a Shakespeare play.

Toward the end of the semester, we attended a professional production of *As You Like It*, set in the 1960s. While the actors' performances were skillful, the modernized setting and the traditional conceptions of gender roles were disappointing. During the post-play discussion, an audience member challenged the company to defend their decision to modernize the setting, observing that we do not know much about Shakespeare's life, but we do know he did not set the play in the 1960s. One of the actors replied that we do know quite a lot about Shakespeare's life. She had, in fact, read *Will in the World* while preparing her part and learned that Shakespeare was a Catholic and had

consorted with Jesuits. She went on to recommend the book to everyone present as an outstanding source on Shakespeare's life.

In class the following week, the students brought up the incident, which seemed to be a textbook example of wrong Shakespeare and its dissemination. I asked if one of us should have attempted to correct the actor. Is not that part of our responsibility as Shakespeare scholars? Several of the students remarked that to do so would have seemed quibbling and pedantic; nor would it have been very effective. Should we not be happy that people are performing, watching, and reading about Shakespeare? Attempting to limit people's engagement with Shakespeare would seem counter-productive, if not authoritarian. Two conflicting ideas emerged: While academics feel they do have a responsibility to mediate access to Shakespeare, there is sometimes a contradictory impulse to popularize Shakespeare whenever possible. The border between academic and popular Shakespeare seemed to be re-established during this discussion. I was reminded of Burt's characterization of "the older model of the academic intellectual as vanguard reformer of politically incorrect popular culture" (1998, xiv). This re-establishment could certainly help to explain some of the contention over *Will in the World*. If Greenblatt were motivated by a desire to popularize Shakespeare, and his interviews certainly suggest that, then reviewers such as Kakutani were accurate in their assessment of the book as written for a popular audience. Yet presumably because of Greenblatt's status as a scholar and the reputation of Norton as an academic press, many reviews approached the book as if it were the next work in a series that began in 1980 with *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. This idea, though, does not fully explain the harsh notices given by reviewers such as Fowler, Jenkyns, and Nehring. Nor does it account for the interest in matters such as the advance on the book. More was at stake in the academic reception of *Will in the World*.

Continuing to look for reviews, I learned that I was not the only one who had noticed the popularity of *Will in the World* and its often contentious reception. Three different writers offered a range of explanations. Editor of the *The New York Times Book Review* Rachel Donadio, *Guardian* critic Robert McCrum, and the *Los Angeles Times*'s Lucasta Miller all cite academic jealousy, as have several reviewers. Envy is an easy motive to understand and an even easier explanation to offer. Getting a book published is difficult enough for an academic, let alone receiving an advance for it or being sent on a publicity tour. What is more, in review after review, Greenblatt gets characterized as the pre-eminent Shakespeare scholar in the United States and sometimes in the world. Anyone might appreciate a fraction of this positive attention. While jealousy certainly may be the case to some degree, it does not speak well of academics who surely have more professional motives, however critical their conclusions may be.

Miller suggestively raises another motive, a feeling of academic betrayal. For Greenblatt, the founder of new historicism, to write a Shakespeare biography that is not new historicist is "apostasy," especially for a scholar once known for being an "anti-establishment figure" (Miller 2005, 20). Donadio offers a similar reason, referring to reviews by Holland and Bate. Carey also notes the lack of new historicism in the book. Burrow is perhaps most frank when at the end of his review, he remarks that Greenblatt could have written an outstanding (i.e., academic) biography of Shakespeare but did not, and instead wrote a popular (non-academic) biography. For McCabe and Bate, the disappointment seems to be that *Will in the World* claims to be an academic book, but is not as theoretical and academic as it should be and that Greenblatt misses opportunities to use his biography of Shakespeare to engage current academic issues. Or, to put it another way, they feel that Greenblatt has neglected his duties to the academy by attempting to cross the border with a popular biography of Shakespeare. Terry Eagleton, professor of Cultural Theory in the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Manchester and author of many books on English literature, including *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983/1996) and *William Shakespeare* (1987), writes a largely positive review, but notes that, except for his command of detail, "Greenblatt seems to have strategically ditched the rest of his new-historical baggage" (2004, 48). Thomas Pendleton, professor of English at Iona College and co-editor of the *Shakespeare Newsletter*, wrote a largely negative review that echoes Eagleton, concurring that Greenblatt's method "seems to have little to do with his usual New Historicist approach" (2004, 71).

John Sutherland, Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College, writing in *The Guardian*, also sees jealousy and betrayal as the sources of the negative reviews. For Sutherland, though, money is the root of all contention. Simply put, in creating a popular book, Greenblatt has accepted "the Mephistophelean invitation to write the great book about the great dramatist for a great sum" (Sutherland 2005). Because Greenblatt is an academic, Sutherland seems to argue that even if he is an academic celebrity, the scholar has a duty to produce new works in order to advance scholarship, not to make a profit. If we accept this sense of betrayal on the part of academics as part of the motivation for their negative reviews, those reviewers can be seen as acting to correct Greenblatt's transgressions. Rather than aggression, the *ad hominem* critiques by Fowler, Burrow, and others are defensive acts. They are attempting to maintain, if not strengthen, the boundary between popular and academic Shakespeare by scolding Greenblatt for his disobedience.

In several interviews, Greenblatt has defended his approach. In the interview with Lacher noted above, Greenblatt forcefully states his desire to address readers beyond the relatively limited numbers of academic scholars. The pre-publication interview with *Publishers Weekly* indicates

that he wrote more for a popular audience than an academic one (Greenblatt 2004b). In another interview he claims, "It's OK . . . to talk about the presence of lives in a work of anthropology, but there is still academic prejudice against literary biography. I wanted to break out of those boundaries" (quoted in Miller 2005, 20). While this response may serve to explain some of Greenblatt's methodological decisions, it does not quite exonerate him from the charge that he is somehow betraying new historicism, in particular, or his field in general. In fact, it suggests that he is writing an academic book, but one more suited for anthropology than his own discipline.

It is easy to see how *Will in the World's* popularity, its exposure in the popular and academic press, the advance (however much it was), and Norton's marketing could generate feelings of jealousy. Although I cannot imagine such a thing ever happening, I would be thrilled to have my research and writing taken up, debated, and even harshly criticized, as Greenblatt's has been. I am not sure that I share a feeling of betrayal. *Will in the World* disappointed me, but I also feel that Greenblatt has made outstanding contributions to his profession, and I understand his desire to reach a wider audience. *Will in the World* is an informative, thoughtful book that reached a broad, non-academic readership. Donadio also recognizes this, suggesting that Greenblatt is simply following the paths of scholars such as Simon Schama and Louis Menand, who have begun to produce popular works for the general public.

Neither of these men, however, writes about Shakespeare. Several more explanations for the negative reviews have been offered, most focusing on Shakespeare and the popular readership. As Donadio asks, "Who Owns Shakespeare? Readers or scholars? And does a Shakespeare that appeals to general readers necessarily come at the expense of one that stands up to scholarly scrutiny?" (2005, 31). For reviewers such as Fowler, McCabe, and Pendleton, the answers to these questions are straightforward: scholars own Shakespeare, and Shakespeare for general audiences is necessarily subordinated to academic Shakespeare. Again, despite instances of popular Shakespeare crossing into the academy and the book's positive reception from academics such as Duncan-Jones and Wells, many in the academy see and work to defend a distinct boundary between academic and popular Shakespeare. "Right" Shakespeare is factual, objective, and academic and should be disseminated as such; "wrong" Shakespeare is conjectural and Romantic and should be curbed.

McCrum takes up this question from the point of view of popular readers by positing the immense cultural meaning invested in Shakespeare. Because of his cultural value, people are sensitive to how Shakespeare is treated. Just as academics can see *Will in the World* as a betrayal of new historicism, popular readers can see its mixture of fact and speculation as a betrayal of their own knowledge of Shakespeare. The idea that Shakespeare was ordinary and not particularly

interested in literature can be seen as "offensive" (McCrum 2005, 18). Nehring, using the first person plural to suggest that she is speaking for non-academic culture as a whole, bluntly declares, "What we are loathe to forgive [in Shakespeare] is quiet respectability" (2004, 129). She finds the book to be "an expression of academic fashion more than a study of genius" (132). Nehring argues that what makes Shakespeare popular today is not the man, but the play's transhistorical truths and universal themes (134), and that a biography should reify those qualities. To deny such qualities to Shakespeare seems consistent with new historicist practices and, as Gopnik admired, Greenblatt's biography concludes with a sense of Shakespeare's ordinariness. In her review for *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Lois Potter, Professor of English at the University of Delaware and a well-known Shakespeare editor and scholar, finds Shakespeare's ordinariness one of the book's strengths (2005, 374). Writer Robert Cornfield dislikes the invocation of the everyday. The ordinariness and Greenblatt's use of conjecture cause Shakespeare to remain "out of focus, and . . . indistinct, blended gradually with the background," Shakespeare becomes "comfortably banal" (2004, 11).

The popular readers' answer to Donadio's titular question seems to invert the academics' response. The general public expects a Romantic Shakespeare, a transcendent genius and an unchanging pillar of Anglo-American culture. Academics are seen as esoteric theorists working to correct what they see as errors on the part of popular readers. While they approach the biography from different perspectives, both academic and popular reviewers are united in their distress when Greenblatt presents them with a Shakespeare who does not conform to their own constructions. Academics expect right Shakespeare, a historically accurate biography, fully informed by new historicist practices. Providing something conjectural betrays the commitment to the academic pursuit of truth, as well as the implicit commitment to propagating factual or right Shakespeare. General readers, presumably hoping to have their received notions of cultural power reinforced, also feel betrayed when given a Shakespeare who seems quotidian, a position that suggests that their own Shakespeare is wrong. As an academic, then, I was concerned that the students might get the "wrong" — that is, a not fully scholarly — sense of Shakespeare and pass it on to their own students. By allowing this to happen, I too would be guilty of betraying academic Shakespeare. This anxiety is invoked by Michael Allen Mikolajczak, chair of the English Department at St. Thomas University in St. Paul, Minnesota, who writes, "I am uneasy about [Greenblatt's] method and the influence of his books on non-specialist readers. Will teachers of Shakespeare begin hearing about Shakespeare's disagreement with *Campion*?" (2005, 2a). He sees *Will in the World* as a popular book: "It presents a Shakespeare that aficionados want to believe in" (2a). Although I understood it, Mikolajczak's forthright reinscription of the boundary made me uncomfortable. It sounded condescending, much as my own question about right and wrong Shakespeare had sounded earlier

in the term. Certainly, correcting errors is important, but would not such a doctrinaire, hierarchical approach also risk foreclosing people's interest in Shakespeare? Does not this approach reinforce the belief that academics are elitist and out of touch with everyday culture?

Our final discussion on *Will in the World* produced no comfortable conclusions. The students and I agreed that each side of the academic/popular boundary had strong reasons for maintaining that boundary when it came to Shakespeare's biography. But as academics we could not fully answer the question of academic responsibility over access to Shakespeare. Wrong Shakespeare seemed to be a troublesome possibility. Mikolajczak's concerns had been reiterated by the conversation with the aforementioned cast of *As You Like It*. The task of taking on the responsibility for correcting wrong Shakespeare in public, whether it be in a post-play discussion or a book review, runs the risk of turning one into a sort of police officer rather than teacher and thereby alienating those potentially interested in Shakespeare. This seems to run contrary to another unspoken value of the academic: that we ought to help to spread interest in academic Shakespeare, not stifle it.

Greenblatt's book suffers from the same sort of contradiction. Attempting to write a popular biography of Shakespeare fulfills his desire to popularize Shakespeare. In his doing so, the risk of generating or perpetuating wrong Shakespeare is inevitable. *Will in the World* was doomed to displease nearly everyone. But not every review of Greenblatt's book has been negative. Academic and popular readers alike find the book enjoyable and valuable, which suggests a degree of tolerance for border-crossing work on both sides and a certain flexibility regarding right and wrong Shakespeare. This seems to be one of the lessons of *Will in the World*. The work itself is an attempt by an academic celebrity to use his reputation and abilities to create a book that reaches from the academic side of the border to the popular side. Some may question Greenblatt's motives, but if sales and a National Book Award nomination are measures of success, then the book is successful. It was the reviewers, and then mostly those who disliked the book, who saw this crossing as a threat and used their responses to try to curb the book and reinforce the boundary. *Will in the World* does not exactly eliminate the boundary between academic and popular Shakespeare, but it does expose the boundary and the assumptions that underpin it, as well as suggest ways in which it is permeable.

The notion of "right" Shakespeare and "wrong" Shakespeare forms an important part of that boundary. Each side has particular concerns, but the use of conjecture is by far the most prominent. This shared concern demonstrates different manifestations of the same anxiety that we do not know as much about Shakespeare as we want to know. For academics, the lack of factual information reminds us of the tenuous nature of our field and our research. Because the humanities



are seen as subjective, our work is available to ideological and populist critiques that work in the sciences largely avoids. What is more, academic Shakespeare depends on popular Shakespeare as an audience and consumer, directly or indirectly, of its work. The situation becomes uncomfortably paradoxical. Academic Shakespeareans must demonstrate a commitment to rigorous standards of scholarship that value objectivity and theoretical rigor, but at the same time acknowledge a popular audience with very different interests and requirements. For the general public, Shakespeare can seem to belong to high culture academics, who, with few exceptions, tend to guard him jealously. And by guarding Shakespeare so assiduously, academics can alienate the very audience that can make their work relevant.

What makes *Will in the World* exceptional and enables it to cross the boundary from the academic into the public are its strengths as a book and the reputation of Greenblatt as an academic celebrity. Simply being a Harvard professor brings with it a certain amount of prestige and influence. The reviews, especially in popular venues, constantly use superlatives to describe Greenblatt's academic status. In interviews, he mentions his consultation on *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden 1998) and his meeting with President Clinton in 1998 (Greenblatt 2004e). Just as an actor such as Al Pacino can use his celebrity as a movie star to fashion himself as a Shakespearean actor and to produce a documentary about *Richard III* or popularize a feature film of *The Merchant of Venice*, an academic with the celebrity of Stephen Greenblatt can write a biography of Shakespeare that will automatically appeal to academics and popular readers. His publisher promoted the book, and his reputation gave him access to interview shows and academic and popular periodicals. The publication, marketing, and sales of *Will in the World* demonstrate how the border between academic and popular Shakespeare can be crossed. The reception of the book shows the importance of that border's stability, maintaining a symbiotic relationship between academic and popular circles. What is most revelatory is not that Levine's divide between high and low culture can be crossed, but that the key to crossing it is celebrity, a quality associated with popular culture that is appropriated by Greenblatt.

### Notes

1. I would like to thank Kelly Cameron, Elizabeth Ecker, Danielle Kvanvig, Jennifer McKenzie, Kelli Muzzy, the generous and thoughtful readers at *Borrowers and Lenders*, and especially D. K. Peterson for their invaluable feedback and advice on this article.
2. See Honigmann 1985; Bearman 2002; and Honigmann 2002.
3. O'Toole and Bate appear to critique the book on the grounds of American ignorance of British fauna. While this explanation is compelling, it seems curious that Norton and Greenblatt would

allow the American edition of the book to retain an error. By this logic, my own copy of *Will in the World*, first edition, second printing, which reads "seen his share of spiny hedgehogs and, as an adult, he may have seen the porcupine that Queen Elizabeth kept in her small menagerie," is apparently British (Greenblatt 2004a, 42). And in terms of textual accuracy, the matter is still not quite settled. While O'Toole is correct that "porcupine" fits the meter, it is not the word that appears in the source text. The full quotation from Andrew S. Cairncross's Arden Shakespeare reads: "And fought so long till that his thighs with darts / Were almost like a sharp-quilled porpentine" (2 *Henry VI*, 3.1.362-63).

4. In an article in the *New York Times Book Review*, Randy Kennedy describes the practice of book displays and their effect on sales (Kennedy 2005).

### Online Resources

Internet Movie Database Entry for *Looking for Richard* [cited 26 January, 2007]. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116913>.

Internet Movie Database Entry for *Shakespeare in Love* [cited 26 January, 2007]. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0138097/>.

Interview with Stephen Greenblatt. "Morning Edition." National Public Radio [cited 26 January, 2007]. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4174163>.

W. W. Norton advertisement for *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* [cited 26 January, 2007]. Available online at <http://www.wwnorton.com/college/titles/english/will/>.

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