

*European Scholarship on Identity: Burckhardt, Greenblatt, Martin, and Ruggiero*

It is not until the end of the fourteenth century that new perspectives on identity found root in Spain. New notions of “who” was “who” had arrived, albeit, I argue Italians and other Europeans were behind in relationship to Spaniards. There is a growing consensus among early modern historians that there were fundamental shifts in social organization and personal identities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In short, these social transformations were revolutionary because they shattered medieval religious identities (i.e. Jewish versus Christian), and replaced them with multilayered and overlapping categories (i.e. *conversos*, Jewish converts to Christianity). During his era, “group” identity constructions fractured into “individualized” identities. The nineteenth century historian, Jacob Burckhardt, who authored the influential text, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, initiated historians’ discussion of the issue of identity. He contended that early modern persons perceived themselves, unlike their medieval counterparts, as “spiritual individuals” distinctly separate from social groups. In one of his most poignant observations on the matter, he wrote:

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossessions, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was only conscious of himself as a member of a race, people, party, family, or

corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such.<sup>i</sup>

From Burckhardt's observation that a subjective self arose from a morose corporate community, it is comprehensible to perceive how persons create new forms of individual perceptions. Stephen Greenblatt, author of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, extends this argument and adds that the realm of the individual came to fruition during the sixteenth century. He postulated, "There were selves and they could be fashioned".<sup>ii</sup> Greenblatt presents a compelling position that clarifies how the monotony of medieval group identities, such as Christian or Jewish ones, could birth new individual identities. Put simply, individuality created opportunities for great variability in identity. Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the any member of a Castilian *converso* family was by any means an "individual" as it is understood in this twenty-first century. Rather, the idea of individuality was far more nuanced and unusual than one might imagine. Greenblatt clarifies that these were not "expressive individuals", but rather persons that existed as "cultural artifacts" who were molded by social institutions. In other words, persons were a direct byproduct of these convoluted events.

Another valuable intellectual who speaks to this issue is John Jeffries Martin and his *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*. His text enhances our understanding of the multi-

modal nature of early modern identities, argues that the Renaissance “self” was not a “thing,” but a collection of relations between the internal and external experiences of the individual.<sup>iii</sup> Early modern men and women viewed their identities as an array of “possible permutations”—in essence, the self served as a flexible intermediary between an individual’s interior and the social networks surrounding them.<sup>iv</sup> His neatly delineated model proposes that Renaissance men and women understood the self as existing in five forms—the socially conforming, prudential, performative, possessed, and the sincere self. Martin asserts that some of these identities offered persons “at least an allusion of control” over the self, whereas other identities either diluted the self into one of an unwilling host, as in the case of the demonically possessed, or brought forth a precursor of modernity, as demonstrated by the ethically enlightened sincere self.<sup>v</sup> Utilizing the compounding lens of the late sixteenth-century thinker, Montaigne, Martin locates the generation of the sincere self as an outcome of the Renaissance reconciliation of the twelfth century notion of the *Concordia of God* and humanity, the Reformation’s concern with sincerity but preoccupation with human sinfulness, and the new sense that men and women as “agents” were responsible for their actions and assertions.

Lastly, consider Guido Ruggiero’s work, such as *Machiavelli in Love*, which explores early modern sexuality identities in the context of broader social groups. For example, he notes that a woman might hold more than one identity—that of a prostitute as well as an honorable lady. In one context, a married woman of modest means who turned to prostitution for financial sustenance was a whore, and other instances, the community

might view her a good neighbor with honor.<sup>vi</sup> Ruggiero continues with his example of the whore and lady, by adding:

The relativity of such socially shared ‘consensus identities’ explain much about the apparently fluid nature of Renaissance identity and what has been labeled Renaissance self-fashioning. In the end, as we shall see, there was perhaps less of the later and more identity negotiation by individuals in dialogue with the various social groups with which they lived, played, and worked.<sup>vii</sup>

Assembled together, this quadrumvirate of scholars artfully reconciles how the religious and social tensions of the early modern period produced new forms of identities and selves.

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<sup>i</sup> Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 98.

<sup>ii</sup> Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 1.

<sup>iii</sup> Jeffries Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, ix.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>vi</sup> Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love*, 21.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

PENGUIN CLASSICS

JACOB BURCKHARDT  
THE CIVILIZATION OF  
THE RENAISSANCE IN ITALY



Burckhardt, Jacob. The Civilization of  
the Renaissance in Italy. London: Penguin,  
1990.

Pages 98-106

PART II

*The Development of the Individual*

PERSONALITY

IN THE character of these states, whether republics or despotisms, lies not the only but the chief reason for the early development of the Italian. To this it is due that he was the first-born among the sons of modern Europe.

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness – that which was turned within as that which was turned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation – only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*,<sup>32</sup> and recognized himself as such. In the same way the Greek had once distinguished himself from the barbarian, and the Arab had felt himself an individual at a time when other Asiatics knew themselves only as members of a race. It will not be difficult to show that this result was due above all to the political circumstances of Italy.

In far earlier times we can here and there detect a development of free personality which in northern Europe either did not occur at all, or could not display itself in the same manner. The band of audacious wrongdoers in the tenth century described to us by Liudprand, some of the contemporaries of Gregory VII (for example, Benzo of Alba) and a few of the opponents of the first Hohenstaufen show us characters of this kind. But at the close of the thirteenth century Italy began to swarm with individuality; the ban laid upon human personality was dissolved; and a thousand figures meet us each in its own special shape and dress. Dante's great poem would have been impossible in any other country of Europe, if only for the reason that they all still lay

under the spell of race. For Italy the august poet, through the wealth of individuality which he set forth, was the most national herald of his time. But this unfolding of the treasures of human nature in literature and art – this many-sided representation and criticism – will be discussed in separate chapters; here we have to deal only with the psychological fact itself. This fact appears in the most decisive and unmistakable form. The Italians of the fourteenth century knew little of false modesty or of hypocrisy in any shape; not one of them was afraid of singularity, of being and seeming unlike his neighbours.

Despotism, as we have already seen, fostered in the highest degree the individuality not only of the tyrant or *condottiere* himself,<sup>33</sup> but also of the men whom he protected or used as his tools – the secretary, minister, poet and companion. These people were forced to know all the inward resources of their own nature, passing or permanent; and their enjoyment of life was enhanced and concentrated by the desire to obtain the greatest satisfaction from a possibly very brief period of power and influence.

But even the subjects whom they ruled over were not free from the same impulse. Leaving out of account those who wasted their lives in secret opposition and conspiracies, we speak of the majority who were content with a strictly private station, like most of the urban population of the Byzantine empire and the Muhammadan states. No doubt it was often hard for the subjects of a Visconti to maintain the dignity of their persons and families, and multitudes must have lost in moral character through the servitude they lived under. But this was not the case with regard to individuality; for political impotence does not hinder the different tendencies and manifestations of private life from thriving in the fullest vigour and variety. Wealth and culture, so far as display and rivalry were not forbidden to them, a municipal freedom which did not cease to be considerable, and a Church which, unlike that of the Byzantine or of the Muhammadan world, was not identical with the state – all these conditions undoubtedly favoured the growth of individual thought, for which the necessary leisure was furnished by the cessation of party conflicts. The private man, indifferent to politics, and busied partly with serious pursuits, partly with the interests of a dilettante, seems to have been first fully formed in these despotisms of the fourteenth century. Documentary evidence cannot, of course, be required on such a point. The novelists, from whom we might expect information, describe to us oddities in plenty, but only from one point

of view and in so far as the needs of the story demand. Their scene, too, lies chiefly in the republican cities.

In the latter, circumstances were also, but in another way, favourable to the growth of individual character. The more frequently the governing party was changed, the more the individual was led to make the utmost of the exercise and enjoyment of power. The statesmen and popular leaders, especially in Florentine history, acquired so marked a personal character that we can scarcely find, even exceptionally, a parallel to them in contemporary history, hardly even in Jacob von Artevelde.

The members of the defeated parties, on the other hand, often came into a position like that of the subjects of the despotic states, with the difference that the freedom or power already enjoyed, and in some cases the hope of recovering them, gave a higher energy to their individuality. Among these men of involuntary leisure we find, for instance, an Agnolo Pandolfini (d. 1446), whose work on domestic economy<sup>34</sup> is the first complete programme of a developed private life. His estimate of the duties of the individual as against the dangers and thanklessness of public life is in its way a true monument of the age.

Banishment, too, has this effect above all, that it either wears the exile out or develops whatever is greatest in him. 'In all our more populous cities,' says Gioviano Pontano, 'we see a crowd of people who have left their homes of their own free will; but a man takes his virtues with him wherever he goes.' And, in fact, they were by no means only men who had been actually exiled, but thousands left their native place voluntarily, because they found its political or economical condition intolerable. The Florentine emigrants at Ferrara and the Luchese in Venice formed whole colonies by themselves.

The cosmopolitanism which grew up in the most gifted circles is in itself a high stage of individualism. Dante, as we have already said, finds a new home in the language and culture of Italy, but goes beyond even this in the words, 'My country is the whole world.' And when his recall to Florence was offered him on unworthy conditions, he wrote back: 'Can I not everywhere behold the light of the sun and the stars; everywhere meditate on the noblest truths, without appearing ingloriously and shamefully before the city and the people? Even my bread will not fail me.' The artists exult no less defiantly in their freedom from the constraints of fixed residence. 'Only he who has

learned everything,' says Ghiberti,<sup>35</sup> 'is nowhere a stranger; robbed of his fortune and without friends, he is yet the citizen of every country, and can fearlessly despise the changes of fortune.' In the same strain an exiled humanist writes: 'Wherever a learned man fixes his seat, there is home.'<sup>36</sup>

An acute and practised eye might be able to trace, step by step, the increase in the number of complete men during the fifteenth century. Whether they had before them as a conscious object the harmonious development of their spiritual and material existence is hard to say; but several of them attained it, so far as is consistent with the imperfection of all that is earthly. It may be better to renounce the attempt at an estimate of the share which fortune, character and talent had in the life of Lorenzo il Magnifico. But look at a personality like that of Ariosto, especially as shown in his satires. In what harmony are there expressed the pride of the man and the poet, the irony with which he treats his own enjoyment, the most delicate satire, and the deepest goodwill!

When this impulse to the highest individual development was combined with a powerful and varied nature, which had mastered all the elements of the culture of the age, then arose the 'all-sided man' – *l'uomo universale* – who belonged to Italy alone. Men there were of encyclopedic knowledge in many countries during the Middle Ages, for this knowledge was confined within narrow limits; and even in the twelfth century there were universal artists, but the problems of architecture were comparatively simple and uniform, and in sculpture and painting the matter was of more importance than the form. But in Italy at the time of the Renaissance we find artists who in every branch created new and perfect works, and who also made the greatest impression as men. Others, outside the arts they practised, were masters of a vast circle of spiritual interests.

Dante, who, even in his lifetime, was called by some a poet, by others a philosopher, by others a theologian, pours forth in all his writings a stream of personal force by which the reader, apart from the interest of the subject, feels himself carried away. What power of will must the steady, unbroken elaboration of the *Divine Comedy* have required! And if we look at the matter of the poem, we find that in the whole spiritual or physical world there is hardly an important subject which the poet has not fathomed, and on which his utterances – often only a few words – are not the most weighty of his time. For the plastic arts he is of the first importance, and this for better reasons than

the few references to contemporary artists – he soon became himself the source of inspiration.

The fifteenth century is, above all, that of the many-sided men. There is no biography which does not, besides the chief work of its hero, speak of other pursuits all passing beyond the limits of dilettantism. The Florentine merchant and statesman was often learned in both the classical languages; the most famous humanists read the *Ethics* and *Politics* of Aristotle to him and his sons; even the daughters of the house were highly educated. It is in these circles that private education was first treated seriously. The humanist, on his side, was compelled to the most varied attainments, since his philological learning was not limited, as it is now, to the theoretical knowledge of classical antiquity, but had to serve the practical needs of daily life. While studying Pliny, he made collections of natural history; the geography of the ancients was his guide in treating of modern geography; their history was his pattern in writing contemporary chronicles, even when composed in Italian; he not only translated the comedies of Plautus, but acted as manager when they were put on the stage; every effective form of ancient literature down to the dialogues of Lucian he did his best to imitate; and besides all this, he acted as magistrate, secretary and diplomatist – not always to his own advantage.

But among these many-sided men, some who may truly be called all-sided tower above the rest. Before analysing the general phases of life and culture of this period, we may here, on the threshold of the fifteenth century, consider for a moment the figure of one of these giants – Leon Battista Alberti (b. 1404?, d. 1472). His biography,<sup>37</sup> which is only a fragment, speaks of him but little as an artist, and makes no mention at all of his great significance in the history of architecture. We shall now see what he was, apart from these special claims to distinction.

In all by which praise is won, Leon Battista was from his childhood the first. Of his various gymnastic feats and exercises we read with astonishment how, with his feet together, he could spring over a man's head; how, in the cathedral, he threw a coin in the air till it was heard to ring against the distant roof; how the wildest horses trembled under him. In three things he desired to appear faultless to others, in walking, in riding, and in speaking. He learned music without a master, and yet his compositions were admired by professional judges. Under the pressure of poverty, he studied both civil and canonical law for many

years, till exhaustion brought on a severe illness. In his twenty-fourth year, finding his memory for words weakened, but his sense of facts unimpaired, he set to work at physics and mathematics. And all the while he acquired every sort of accomplishment and dexterity, cross-examining artists, scholars and artisans of all descriptions, down to the cobblers, about the secrets and peculiarities of their craft. Painting and modelling he practised by the way, and especially excelled in admirable likenesses from memory. Great admiration was excited by his mysterious camera obscura, in which he showed at one time the stars and the moon rising over rocky hills, at another wide landscapes with mountains and gulfs receding into dim perspective, and with fleets advancing on the waters in shade or sunshine. And that which others created he welcomed joyfully, and held every human achievement which followed the laws of beauty for something almost divine. To all this must be added his literary works, first of all those on art, which are landmarks and authorities of the first order for the Renaissance of form, especially in architecture; then his Latin prose writings – novels and other works – of which some have been taken for productions of antiquity; his elegies, eclogues and humorous dinner-speeches. He also wrote an Italian treatise on domestic life<sup>38</sup> in four books; and even a funeral oration on his dog. His serious and witty sayings were thought worth collecting, and specimens of them, many columns long, are quoted in his biography. And all that he had and knew he imparted, as rich natures always do, without the least reserve, giving away his chief discoveries for nothing. But the deepest spring of his nature has yet to be spoken of – the sympathetic intensity with which he entered into the whole life around him. At the sight of noble trees and waving cornfields he shed tears; handsome and dignified old men he honoured as 'a delight of nature', and could never look at them enough. Perfectly formed animals won his goodwill as being specially favoured by nature; and more than once, when he was ill, the sight of a beautiful landscape cured him. No wonder that those who saw him in this close and mysterious communion with the world ascribed to him the gift of prophecy. He was said to have foretold a bloody catastrophe in the family of Este, the fate of Florence, and the death of the popes years before they happened, and to be able to read into the countenances and the hearts of men. It need not be added that an iron will pervaded and sustained his whole personality; like all the great men of the Renaissance, he said, 'Men can do all things if they will.'

And Leonardo da Vinci was to Alberti as the finisher to the beginner, as the master to the dilettante. Would only that Vasari's work were here supplemented by a description like that of Alberti! The colossal outlines of Leonardo's nature can never be more than dimly and distantly conceived.

#### GLORY

To this inward development of the individual corresponds a new sort of outward distinction – the modern form of glory.<sup>39</sup>

In the other countries of Europe the different classes of society lived apart, each with its own medieval caste sense of honour. The poetical fame of the troubadours and Minnesingers was peculiar to the knightly order. But in Italy social equality had appeared before the time of the tyrannies or the democracies. We there find early traces of a general society, having, as will be shown more fully later on, a common ground in Latin and Italian literature; and such a ground was needed for this new element in life to grow in. To this must be added that the Roman authors, who were now zealously studied, are filled and saturated with the conception of fame, and that their subject itself – the universal empire of Rome – stood as a permanent ideal before the minds of Italians. From henceforth all the aspirations and achievements of the people were governed by a moral postulate, which was still unknown elsewhere in Europe.

Here, again, as in all essential points, the first witness to be called is Dante. He strove for the poet's garland with all the power of his soul. As publicist and man of letters, he laid stress on the fact that what he did was new, and that he wished not only to be, but to be esteemed, the first in his own walks. But even in his prose writings he touches on the inconveniences of fame; he knows how often personal acquaintance with famous men is disappointing, and explains how this is due partly to the childish fancy of men, partly to envy, and partly to the imperfections of the hero himself. And in his great poem he firmly maintains the emptiness of fame, although in a manner which betrays that his heart was not set free from the longing for it. In paradise the sphere of Mercury is the seat of such blessed ones as on earth strove after glory and thereby dimmed 'the beams of true love'. It is characteristic that the lost souls in hell beg of Dante to keep alive for them their memory and fame on earth, while those in purgatory only entreat his

prayers and those of others for their deliverance. And in a famous passage, the passion for fame – '*lo gran disio dell'eccellenza*' – is reproved for the reason that intellectual glory is not absolute, but relative to the times, and may be surpassed and eclipsed by greater successors.

The new race of poet-scholars which arose soon after Dante quickly made themselves masters of this fresh tendency. They did so in a double sense, being themselves the most acknowledged celebrities of Italy, and at the same time, as poets and historians, consciously disposing of the reputation of others. An outward symbol of this sort of fame was the coronation of the poets, of which we shall speak later on.

A contemporary of Dante, Albertinus Musattus or Mussatus, crowned poet at Padua by the bishop and rector, enjoyed a fame which fell little short of deification. Every Christmas Day the doctors and students of both colleges at the university came in solemn procession before his house with trumpets and, as it seems, with burning tapers, to salute him and bring him presents. His reputation lasted till, in 1318, he fell into disgrace with the ruling tyrant of the House of Carrara.

This new incense, which once was offered only to saints and heroes, was given in clouds to Petrarch, who persuaded himself in his later years that it was but a foolish and troublesome thing. His letter 'To Posterity' is the confession of an old and famous man, who is forced to gratify the public curiosity. He admits that he wishes for fame in the times to come, but would rather be without it in his own day. In his dialogue on fortune and misfortune, the interlocutor, who maintains the futility of glory, has the best of the contest. But, at the same time, Petrarch is pleased that the autocrat of Byzantium knows him as well by his writings as Charles IV knows him. And in fact, even in his lifetime, his fame extended far beyond Italy. And the emotion which he felt was natural when his friends, on the occasion of a visit to his native Arezzo (1350), took him to the house where he was born, and told him how the city had provided that no change should be made in it. In former times the dwellings of certain great saints were preserved and revered in this way, like the cell of St Thomas Aquinas in the Dominican convent at Naples, and the Portiuncula of St Francis near Assisi; and one or two great jurists also enjoyed the half-mythical reputation which led to this honour. Towards the close of the fourteenth century the people at Bagnolo, near Florence, called an old building the 'Studio' of Accursius (b. c. 1150), but, nevertheless,

suffered it to be destroyed. It is probable that the great incomes and the political influence which some jurists obtained as consulting lawyers made a lasting impression on the popular imagination.

To the cultus of the birthplaces of famous men must be added that of their graves, and, in the case of Petrarch, of the spot where he died. In memory of him Arquà became a favourite resort of the Paduans, and was dotted with graceful little villas. At this time there were no 'classic spots' in northern Europe, and pilgrimages were only made to pictures and relics. It was a point of honour for the different cities to possess the bones of their own and foreign celebrities; and it is most remarkable how seriously the Florentines, even in the fourteenth century – long before the building of Santa Croce – laboured to make their cathedral a pantheon. Accorso, Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio and the jurist Zanobi della Strada were to have had magnificent tombs there erected to them. Late in the fifteenth century, Lorenzo il Magnifico applied in person to the Spoletans, asking them to give up the corpse of the painter Fra Filippo Lippi for the cathedral, and received the answer that they had none too many ornaments to the city, especially in the shape of distinguished people, for which reason they begged him to spare them; and, in fact, he had to be contented with erecting a cenotaph. And even Dante, in spite of all the applications to which Boccaccio urged the Florentines with bitter emphasis, remained sleeping tranquilly by the side of San Francesco at Ravenna, 'among ancient tombs of emperors and vaults of saints, in more honourable company than thou, O Home, couldst offer him'. It even happened that a man once took away unpunished the lights from the altar on which the crucifix stood, and set them by the grave, with the words, 'Take them; thou art more worthy of them than He, the Crucified One!'

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And now the Italian cities began again to remember their ancient citizens and inhabitants. Naples, perhaps, had never forgotten its tomb of Virgil, since a kind of mythical halo had become attached to the name.

The Paduans, even in the sixteenth century, firmly believed that they possessed not only the genuine bones of their founder, Antenor, but also those of the historian Livy.<sup>40</sup> 'Sulmona,' says Boccaccio, 'bewails that Ovid lies buried far away in exile; and Parma rejoices that Cassius sleeps within its walls.' The Mantuans coined a medal in 1257 with the bust of Virgil, and raised a statue to represent him. In a

fit of aristocratic insolence, the guardian of the young Gonzaga, Carlo Malatesta, caused it to be pulled down in 1392, and was afterwards forced, when he found the fame of the old poet too strong for him, to set it up again. Even then, perhaps, the grotto, a couple of miles from the town, where Virgil was said to have meditated, was shown to strangers, like the 'Scuola di Virgilio' at Naples. Como claimed both the Plinys for its own, and at the end of the fifteenth century erected statues in their honour, sitting under graceful baldachins on the façade of the cathedral.

History and the new topography were now careful to leave no local celebrity unnoticed. At the same period the northern chronicles only here and there, among the list of popes, emperors, earthquakes and comets, put in the remark that at such a time this or that famous man 'flourished'. We shall elsewhere have to show how, mainly under the influence of this idea of fame, an admirable biographical literature was developed. We must here limit ourselves to the local patriotism of the topographers who recorded the claims of their native cities to distinction.

In the Middle Ages, the cities were proud of their saints and of the bones and relics in their churches. With these the panegyrist of Padua in 1450, Michele Savonarola, begins his list; from them he passes to 'the famous men who were no saints, but who, by their great intellect and force [*virtus*] deserve to be added [*adnecti*] to the saints' – just as in classical antiquity the distinguished man came close upon the hero. The further enumeration is most characteristic of the time. First comes Antenor, the brother of Priam, who founded Padua with a band of Trojan fugitives; King Dardanus, who defeated Attila in the Euganean hills, followed him in pursuit and struck him dead at Rimini with a chess-board; the Emperor Henry IV, who built the cathedral; a King Marcus, whose head was preserved in Monselice; then a couple of cardinals and prelates as founders of colleges, churches and so forth; the famous Augustinian theologian, Fra Alberto; a string of philosophers beginning with Paolo Veneto and the celebrated Pietro of Albano; the jurist Paolo Padovano; then Livy and the poets Petrarch, Mussato, Lovato. If there is any want of military celebrities in the list, the poet consoles himself for it by the abundance of learned men whom he has to show, and by the more durable character of intellectual glory, while the fame of the soldier is buried with his body, or, if it lasts, owes its permanence only to the scholar. It is nevertheless

□ RENAISSANCE □  
SELF-FASHIONING

*From More to Shakespeare*



STEPHEN GREENBLATT

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## A Note on Texts

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I have, in the interest of readability, modernized the spelling and punctuation of all the texts with the exception of those places where the sense or meter is directly affected and the further exception of Spenser's poetry. Given Spenser's attempt to cast the glow of antiquity upon his work, it seemed perverse to rob it of that genuine antiquity that time has conferred upon it.

Greenblatt, Stephen. Renaissance Self-Fashioning:  
From More to Shakespeare. Chicago: Univ.  
of Chicago Press, 1980.  
pages 1-4

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## Introduction

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My subject is *self-fashioning* from More to Shakespeare; my starting point is quite simply that in sixteenth-century England there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned. Of course, there is some absurdity in so bald a pronouncement of the obvious: after all, there are always selves—a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires—and always some elements of deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity. One need only think of Chaucer's extraordinarily subtle and wry manipulations of *persona* to grasp that what I propose to examine does not suddenly spring up from nowhere when 1499 becomes 1500. Moreover, there is considerable empirical evidence that there may well have been less *autonomy* in self-fashioning in the sixteenth century than before, that family, state, and religious institutions impose a more rigid and far-reaching discipline upon their middle-class and aristocratic subjects. Autonomy is an issue but not the sole or even the central issue: the power to impose a shape upon oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity—that of others at least as often as one's own.

What *is* central is the perception—as old in academic writing as Burckhardt and Michelet—that there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities. This change is difficult to characterize in our usual ways because it is not only complex but resolutely dialectical. If we say that there is a new stress on the executive power of the will, we must say that there is the most sustained and relentless assault upon the will; if we say

that there is a new social mobility, we must say that there is a new assertion of power by both family and state to determine all movement within the society; if we say that there is a heightened awareness of the existence of alternative modes of social, theological, and psychological organization, we must say that there is a new dedication to the imposition of control upon those modes and ultimately to the destruction of alternatives.

Perhaps the simplest observation we can make is that in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process. Such self-consciousness had been widespread among the elite in the classical world, but Christianity brought a growing suspicion of man's power to shape identity: "Hands off yourself," Augustine declared. "Try to build up yourself, and you build a ruin."<sup>1</sup> This view was not the only one available in succeeding centuries, but it was influential, and a powerful alternative began to be fully articulated only in the early modern period. When in 1589 Spenser writes that the general intention and meaning that he has "fashioned" in *The Faerie Queene* is "to fashion a gentleman," or when he has his knight Calidore declare that "in each mans self . . . / It is, to fashion his owne lyfes estate," or when he tells his beloved in one of the *Amoretti*, "You frame my thoughts, and fashion me within,"<sup>2</sup> he is drawing upon the special connotations for his period of the verb *fashion*, a word that does not occur at all in Chaucer's poetry. As a term for the action or process of making, for particular features or appearance, for a distinct style or pattern, the word had been long in use, but it is in the sixteenth century that *fashion* seems to come into wide currency as a way of designating the forming of a self. This forming may be understood quite literally as the imposition upon a person of physical form—"Did not one fashion us in the womb?" Job asks in the King James Bible,<sup>3</sup> while, following the frequent injunctions to "fashion" children, midwives in the period attempted to mold the skulls of the newborn into the proper shape.<sup>4</sup> But, more significantly for our purposes, fashioning may suggest the achievement of a less tangible shape: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving. As we might expect, the recurrent model for this latter fashioning is Christ. Those whom God in his foreknowledge has called, Tyndale translates the epistle to the Romans, he "fashioned unto the shape of his son" (8:29), and thus the true Christian, Tyndale writes in the *Obedience*, "feeleth . . . him self . . . altered and fashioned like unto Christ." "We are exhorted,"

Archbishop Sandys remarks in a sermon, "to fashion ourselves according to that similitude and likeness which is in him," while in the 1557 Geneva translation of the New Testament we read that Christ "was disfigured to fashion us, he died for our life." If Christ is the ultimate model, he is not even in the New Testament the only one: "In all things," Paul tells the Corinthians, in Tyndale's translation, "I fashioned my self to all men to save at the least way some" (1 Cor. 9:22). This principle of adaptation is obviously not limited to the propagation of the Gospel: in Richard Taverner's *Garden of Wisdom* (1539), for example, we are told that whoever desires to be conversant with public affairs, "must . . . fashion himself to the manners of men,"<sup>5</sup> and this counsel is tirelessly reiterated.

Thus separated from the imitation of Christ—a separation that can, as we shall see, give rise to considerable anxiety—self-fashioning acquires a new range of meanings: it describes the practice of parents and teachers; it is linked to manners or demeanor, particularly that of the elite; it may suggest hypocrisy or deception, an adherence to mere outward ceremony; it suggests representation of one's nature or intention in speech or actions. And with representation we return to literature, or rather we may grasp that self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life. It invariably crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control, the attempt to fashion other selves. Such boundaries may, to be sure, be strictly observed in criticism, just as we may distinguish between literary and behavioral styles, but in doing so we pay a high price, for we begin to lose a sense of the complex interactions of meaning in a given culture. We wall off literary symbolism from the symbolic structures operative elsewhere, as if art alone were a human creation, as if humans themselves were not, in Clifford Geertz's phrase, cultural artifacts.<sup>6</sup>

"There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture," Geertz writes, meaning by culture not primarily "complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters"—but rather "a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions . . .—for the governing of behavior."<sup>7</sup> Self-fashioning is in effect the Renaissance version of these control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to

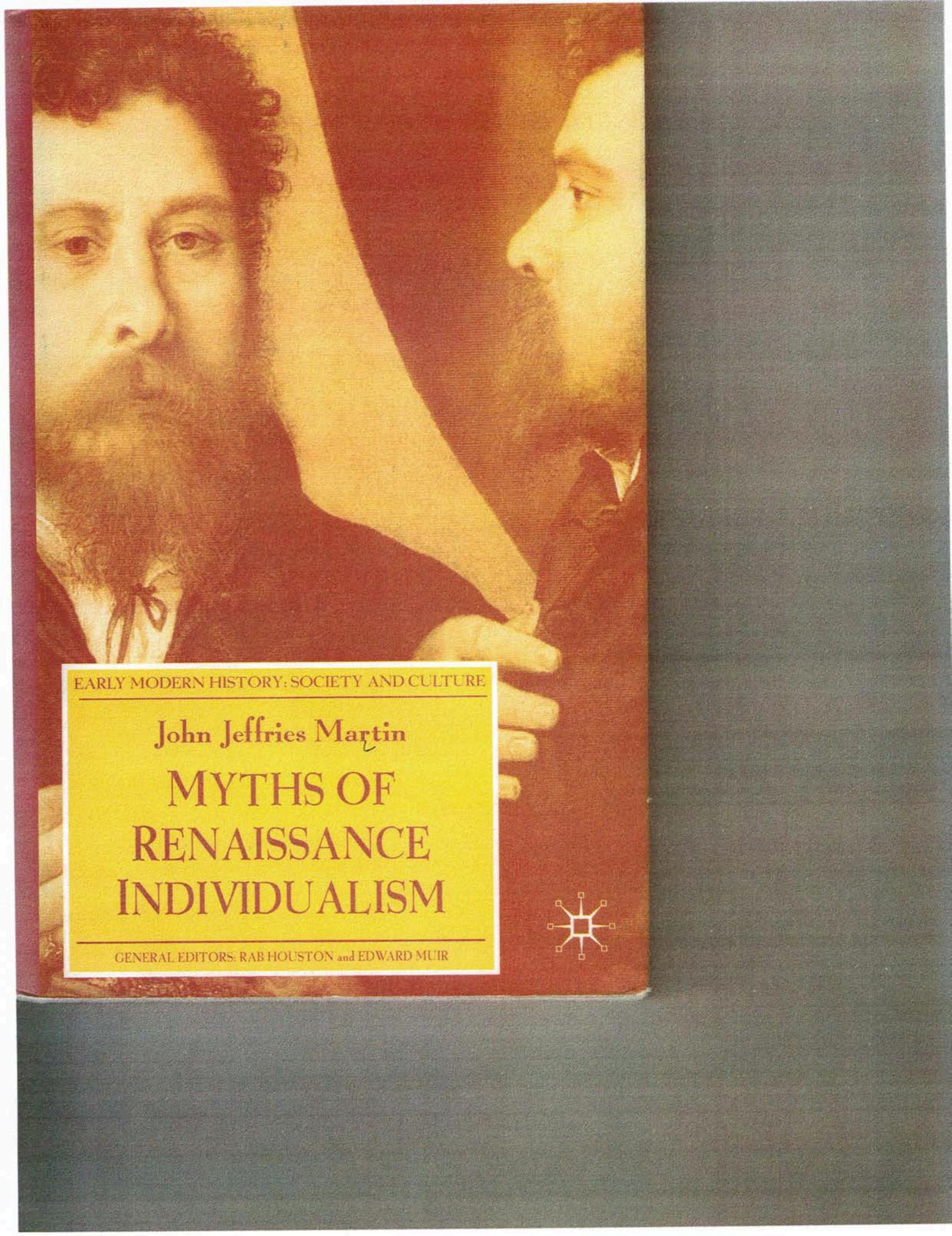
concrete historical embodiment. Literature functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes. The interpretive practice that I have attempted to exemplify in the essays that follow must concern itself with all three of these functions. If interpretation limits itself to the behavior of the author, it becomes literary biography (in either a conventionally historical or psychoanalytic mode) and risks losing a sense of the larger networks of meaning in which both the author and his works participate. If, alternatively, literature is viewed exclusively as the expression of social rules and instructions, it risks being absorbed entirely into an ideological superstructure. Marx himself vigorously resisted this functional absorption of art, and subsequent Marxist aesthetics, for all its power and sophistication, has never satisfactorily resolved the theoretical problems raised in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Finally, if literature is seen only as a detached reflection upon the prevailing behavioral codes, a view from a safe distance, we drastically diminish our grasp of art's concrete functions in relation to individuals and to institutions, both of which shrink into an obligatory "historical background" that adds little to our understanding. We drift back toward a conception of art as addressed to a timeless, cultureless, universal human essence or, alternatively as a self-regarding, autonomous, closed system—in either case, art as opposed to social life. Self-fashioning then becomes a subject only for sociology, literature for literary criticism.

end

I have attempted instead to practice a more cultural or anthropological criticism—if by "anthropological" here we think of interpretive studies of culture by Geertz, James Boon, Mary Douglas, Jean Duvignaud, Paul Rabinow, Victor Turner, and others.<sup>9</sup> These figures do not enlist themselves under a single banner, still less do they share a single scientific method, but they have in common the conviction that men are born "unfinished animals," that the facts of life are less artless than they look, that both particular cultures and the observers of these cultures are inevitably drawn to a metaphorical grasp of reality, that anthropological interpretation must address itself less to the mechanics of customs and institutions than to the interpretive constructions the members of a society apply to their experiences. A literary criticism that has affinities to this practice must be conscious of its own status as interpretation and intent upon understanding literature as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture; its proper goal, however difficult to realize, is a

poetics of culture. Such an approach is necessarily a balancing act—correcting each of the functional perspectives I sketched in the preceding paragraph against the others—and necessarily impure: its central concerns prevent it from permanently sealing off one type of discourse from another or decisively separating works of art from the minds and lives of their creators and their audiences. I remain concerned, to be sure, with the implications of artistic representation as a distinct human activity—Shakespeare's depiction in *Othello* of his hero's self-construction and destruction is not simply identical to those patterns of self-fashioning and self-cancellation that I explore in the careers of several of my authors—but the way to explore these implications lies neither in denying any relation between the play and social life nor in affirming that the latter is the "thing itself," free from interpretation. Social actions are themselves always embedded in systems of public signification, always grasped, even by their makers, in acts of interpretation, while the words that constitute the works of literature that we discuss here are by their very nature the manifest assurance of a similar embeddedness. Language, like other sign systems, is a collective construction; our interpretive task must be to grasp more sensitively the consequences of this fact by investigating both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text. The literary text remains the central object of my attention in this study of self-fashioning in part because, as I hope these chapters will demonstrate, great art is an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture and in part because, by inclination and training, whatever interpretive powers I possess are released by the resonances of literature. I should add that if cultural poetics is conscious of its status as interpretation, this consciousness must extend to an acceptance of the impossibility of fully reconstructing and reentering the culture of the sixteenth century, of leaving behind one's own situation: it is everywhere evident in this book that the questions I ask of my material and indeed the very nature of this material are shaped by the questions I ask of myself.

I do not shrink from these impurities—they are the price and perhaps among the virtues of this approach—but I have tried to compensate for the indeterminacy and incompleteness they generate by constantly returning to particular lives and particular situations, to the material necessities and social pressures that men and women daily confronted, and to a small number of resonant texts. Each of these texts is viewed as the focal point for converging lines of force in sixteenth-century culture; their



EARLY MODERN HISTORY: SOCIETY AND CULTURE

John Jeffries Martin  
MYTHS OF  
RENAISSANCE  
INDIVIDUALISM

GENERAL EDITORS: RAB HOUSTON and EDWARD MUIR



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Pages ix-20

My study with Apollo -  
appeal to long  
chance of  
in div.

Note of offensive  
discussion during  
the reading in.

## Prologue

Gender?  
Complications  
of race?  
Genetics?

'Know thyself', the ancient oracle from Apollo's temple at Delphi, has always invited a search for self knowledge. But what the self is, or is made of, has remained a matter of debate for centuries, involving not only priests, philosophers, and psychologists but also historians, literary critics, and students of art and art history. In this book, my aim is to contribute to this debate through the exploration of the ways in which Renaissance men and women experienced and understood the relation of inwardness or interiority to the equally vast social, political, cultural, and religious worlds outside themselves. My focus is not only on how men and women in the Renaissance thought about themselves or presented themselves to others but also on the more abstract (if tacit) assumptions they held about the self - that elusive 'thing' that we tend to believe, correctly or not, is at the core of each of us, making 'me' me, 'you' you, and 'that fellow over there' that fellow over there.

clear  
aim

self  
clear  
language

Frequently, when we think about these issues in our own time, we cast our discussions in psychological terms. Almost all of us, as the historian Peter Gay has observed, 'speak Freud' and are therefore familiar, uncannily so, with distinctions between the 'ego' and the 'id', and the 'conscious' and the 'unconscious.' Through novels, movies, and the popularization of psychology, moreover, terms and phrases such as 'the Oedipus complex', 'transference', and 'projection', once almost exclusively the preserve of psychoanalysis, have entered our everyday speech. At the same time we also wonder about the relation of our selves to our cells. Indeed most of us, at some point or another, have been involved in one of those heated, late-night conversations over the question of whether we are products of nature (our genetic makeup) or nurture (the particular environments in which we have been raised and live) - a debate that has grown all the more pressing with virtually daily reports of ever-more effective antidepressants and a bio-technical revolution that promises (or threatens) designer-babies, cloned soldiers, and a superabundance of gifted musicians.

Remind  
reader  
of  
modern  
vs.  
period

In such a climate our understanding of identity evolves rapidly. Until recently, our popular culture - from the novels we read and the movies we watched to the way in which we chose our lovers and our political leaders - was predicated on certain modern notions of the self as a willful, individual protagonist. By contrast, more recent representations

Pop culture  
→  
Modern  
→  
invention

Hum

of identity – in works of science fiction and the cinema especially – have challenged these more traditional ideas through the figures of the replicant, the android, and the cyborg. In our day-to-day activities, we may act on the premise that the self is something well-defined, fixed, or even transcendent, but as soon as we start thinking about the self, it takes on a new shape and appears as something far more complex and contingent. We may even doubt this protean thing has any substantive reality at all. Perhaps it is not selves that make up society; perhaps societies create or ‘fashion’ selves.

This book makes the case that the assumptions men and women made about identity in the European Renaissance were not only radically different from our own, but equally varied and dynamic. At least this is what I believe my research into the ways identities were constructed, experienced, and understood some four or five hundred years ago makes plain, highlighting the gulf between our vocabularies of identity (whether modern or postmodern) and those of Renaissance men and women. Yet these findings fly in the face of the notions, deeply ingrained in our culture, that it was in the Renaissance that the modern individual was born or that the postmodern self first emerged. This is why I have entitled this book *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*. Throughout I will be emphasizing not the similarities of Renaissance to modern and postmodern notions, but rather the differences. This is a work of history, not of genealogy.

Keep the historians  
place a check on  
their own biases

# 1 “Individualism” – a Word Unknown to our Ancestors’

What has been especially striking in recent times ... is the rise of new philosophies challenging the very idea, ensconced since the Renaissance, of a core (if elusive) inner personal identity.

Roy Porter, *Rewriting the Self*, 1997

July 18, 1573. Paolo, a painter, has been summoned to the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Venice. The judges are asking him about an enormous canvas (nearly 40 feet long and 17 feet high) on which he has depicted *The Last Supper*. Paolo completed the painting earlier that year, in April, for the refectory of San Zanipolo, the city’s great Dominican house. In an earlier period, it is unlikely that anyone would have objected to the work. But the atmosphere in Italy has changed. In 1563, the Roman Catholic Church, at the conclusion of the Council of Trent, had issued a decree on religious art. From now on – the decree was explicit – paintings of religious themes were to reinforce the Church’s teachings and be strictly in accordance with Scripture without extraneous representations of profane matters that could detract from the sacred purposes of the image.<sup>1</sup> It is in this climate that Paolo is asked to explain why he has depicted figures in the painting who were not mentioned in the Bible. Whoever is posing the questions knows the work well. He asks Paolo why he has included a ‘man with a bleeding nose’, ‘armed men, dressed in German style’, ‘a clown with a parrot on his fist’, and several other figures, including ‘dwarfs, drunkards, and other lewd things.’ Paolo explains that these were inventions, and he adds that he had made these additions ‘as I saw fit.’ The Inquisition orders him to change the painting, to ‘correct it.’ He never does so. But he (or someone else in his family workshop) changes the title. It is no longer *The Last Supper*; it is *The Feast in the House of Levi*.<sup>2</sup>

see the  
Apoth...

create



Feast in the House of Levi. (Detail.) Veronese, Paolo. Courtesy of Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

Handwritten on left margin: *Handwritten on left margin*

About this Paolo we know many things. He was Paolo Caliari or Paolo Veronese, one of the master artists of the Renaissance. The near equal of Titian, against whose work he measured himself, Veronese was greatly admired for his skill; he received coveted commissions; he was revered for his piety. In a good library you can find dozens of books devoted to his life and works; you can still see his paintings in Venetian churches and in many of the great museums of Europe and the United States. His whimsical, decorative murals in the Barbaro villa at Maser are among the most delightful creations of the age. But what interests me here is not Veronese as we might encounter him in a text on art history or in one of his works on display in a museum or a church. What interests me is a puzzle about personal identity, about the understanding of identity in the Renaissance that Paolo's brief encounter with the Holy Office raises. the quote

Like many others, when I first read this trial, I saw Paolo as a strong, willful individual, prepared to defend his own point of view, his craft, and his discretion before the Inquisition. I especially admired his well-known argument for artistic liberty. 'We painters take the same license as do poets and madmen', he said in defense of his decision to include two German soldiers in the scene. Like artists in the Romantic age, Veronese seemed to portray himself as a creative force, giving expression to his own artistic vision. But, returning to these trial records now – some 25 years after I first read them – I am no longer so sure of how to understand Paolo's identity. His artistic productions were not, in fact, his own. They were commissions; his patrons specified what he was to paint. To be sure, he might take a few liberties in the margins of his work, but he is hardly painting from the heart. Moreover, as we have just seen, he painted *The Last Supper*, but a legal action by the Church in the early 1570s changed the painting into *The Feast in the House of Levi*, the name by which it is known down to the present time.<sup>3</sup> We might even ask if he means the words he speaks before the Inquisition. As he realizes he is trouble, he begins to reach for explanations that seem absurd. The figures he had invented are really not in the main grouping of the painting, he explains to the inquisitor. He is making excuses. He appeals to authority, but weakly, in noting that Michelangelo too had taken liberties by painting nudes in the Sistine Chapel. From this perspective, Paolo's works seem less and less expressions of his own making – of some genius within – and more and more as though they are the products of largely impersonal forces much greater than himself: the wealth and tastes of his patrons; the cultural climate of Venice in a particular decade; the authority and expectations of the Church. Handwritten on right margin

In recent years, historians and other scholars have grown increasingly sensitive to the problem of identity in the Renaissance; they have begun to ask new questions about the meaning of the word 'individualism', about the 'self', and about the ways in which selves were fashioned four or five hundred years ago. In a rather old-fashioned view, of course, most of us would be likely to view Paolo Veronese, as I did upon first reading his responses to the inquisitor, as a strong individual who, in much of what he painted and said, expressed himself. But close attention to the social, political, and religious context may make us reconsider this basic assumption. Perhaps Paolo was not so free – perhaps it does not make sense to think of him as an 'individual' in the modern, common-sense meaning of the term. On this later view, the Renaissance self seems suddenly more complex than we might at first suspect. And yet, if we are to understand the Renaissance, we need to know far more about it than who its great artists and writers were, or about the discoveries of the period, or the major social and political structures or events in which it occurred. We also need to know at least something of how Renaissance men and women viewed themselves; how they constructed, experienced, and understood their identities. As Paolo's uncomfortable encounter with the Holy Office on a hot summer day suggests, the question is not as simple as it first appears.

The most famous statement on Renaissance identities was developed by the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt in his celebrated book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, first published in 1860.<sup>4</sup> This 'essay', as Burckhardt called it, has become and remains one of the genuinely seminal works of history written in modern times. Both from Burckhardt's youthful, enthusiastic, and imaginative immersion in the historical culture of Italy and from his intense, passionate study of the sources, literary and artistic, such figures as the dynamic Florentine humanist Leon Battista Alberti and the brilliant artist and engineer Leonardo da Vinci emerged as well-rounded, accomplished, almost preternaturally creative men or virtuosi – larger than life. And while Burckhardt does not mention Veronese in his *Civilization*, he praised him for his luscious creativity in his *Cicerone*, his learned guidebook to the art works of Renaissance Italy that he had published somewhat earlier in 1855, and made it clear that he saw this Venetian artist as one of the great imaginative forces of the age.<sup>5</sup> Thus Veronese certainly fits in with the sort of creative genius who was both attractive to Burckhardt and who represented an entirely new kind of self, previously unknown. 'In the Middle Ages', Burckhardt wrote, '[m]an was conscious

of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category.' He then added that it was in Italy, above all because of changing political structures, that 'man became a spiritual individual (*geistiges Individuum*), and recognized himself as such.' To Burckhardt and, indeed, to millions of his readers, the Renaissance Italian was 'the first-born among the sons of modern Europe.'<sup>6</sup> It was an era defined by a wealth of remarkably gifted and creative humanists, sculptors, painters, architects, engineers, and poets. It has been a subject of thousands of studies, yet no one understands why so many exceptionally creative people crowded the cities and the courts of this era. No one understands how such a relatively small population produced so many great men.

Nonetheless, Burckhardt's basic assumptions about identities have seemed persuasive. Even now, images of Renaissance individuals – their portraits, their biographies, their letters, even their signatures – strike us as importantly familiar. From the age of Petrarch and Giotto until that of Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Rembrandt (from about 1350 until about 1650), the individual appears to have developed as a salient, well-defined force in the western world. Unlike their medieval ancestors, Renaissance men and women seem to have placed new value on the will and on agency on expressiveness, prudence, and creativity, and to have done so self-consciously. Inevitably we feel that we recognize such individuals (or their robust, three-dimensional representations in the paintings and sculptures of our major museums and galleries) as autonomous, self-contained, psychologically complex persons much like ourselves. They make a powerful impression, especially when the Renaissance is viewed as the inauguration of modern western culture.

But scholars are no longer so sure that Burckhardt's account of Renaissance individualism is valid. New interpretations of the Renaissance 'self' or 'subject' have begun to emerge in many important studies of the period, especially among students of literature. Such scholars – largely in the wake of new philosophical or postmodern ideas that have tended to redefine radically what it is we mean by 'self' – have begun to see the Renaissance 'individual' not as an autonomous agent or a willful protagonist or an artistic genius that would become a stock character in Romantic interpretations of the era (Burckhardt's included) but rather as the harbinger of the postmodern ego: fragmented, divided, even fictitious.<sup>7</sup> As the literary historian Douglas Biow has recently observed of this contemporary scholarship, the importance of the Renaissance now stems not so much from the idea

that it was 'the bright moment when ... individualism found wide-spread nascent expression but as the far darker moment when the modern fragmented self ... [was] painstakingly born.'<sup>8</sup> Within Renaissance studies, Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which first appeared in 1980, is the Ur-text of this postmodern interpretation. To Greenblatt, the self is not an expressive individual but rather a cultural artifact which, much like a painting or a book, is the product of social, economic, and political forces. In a moment of self-reflection about his own exploration of identity in his writing of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt remarks:

When I first conceived this book ... [i]t seemed to me the very hallmark of the Renaissance that middle-class and aristocratic males began to feel that they possessed ... shaping power over their lives, and I saw this power and the freedom it implied as an important element in my own sense of myself. But as my work progressed, I perceived that fashioning oneself and being fashioned by cultural institutions — family, religion, state — were inseparably intertwined. In all my texts and documents, there were, so far as I could tell, no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society. Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artifact.<sup>9</sup>

This radical reinterpretation of the Renaissance self has proven enormously influential, even spilling over into historical studies and many other humanistic disciplines. To many, Burckhardt's Renaissance individual, as one social historian has recently remarked, now seems '[[l]ike an ancient flying machine in a provincial air museum, ... [that] dangles by wires in simulated flight and is visited only by the occasional graduate student who marvels that anyone could have thought such an invention might ever leave the ground.'<sup>10</sup> But it is in cultural history where the influence of this new model is strongest. As one literary historian has written, '[t]he freely self-creating and world-creating Individual of so-called bourgeois humanism is — at least in theory — now defunct.'<sup>11</sup> And, indeed, we might also place Veronese within such a framework. From the perspective of his encounter with the Inquisition, he hardly seems a 'world-creating Individual.' Rather he himself looks more and more — especially in his confrontation with the

via

positioned  
help to say

made power of the Church — like something created by the culture in which he lived — 'the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society.'

In this book, I attempt to approach the history of the Renaissance self from a new angle, neither Burckhardt's nor Greenblatt's. On the one hand, I wish to make the rather straight-forward point that there were multiple models of identity in the Renaissance; on the other, I wish to demonstrate that, if there was a constant in the Renaissance experience of identity, it had to do with different ways of thinking about what we might call, provisionally at least, the relation of the internal to the external self.\* My focus is largely on Italy in the fifteenth and especially in the sixteenth century. Above all, my goal — one that I hope to meet — is to understand the history of the Renaissance self on its own terms. This can't be easy. As my brief discussion of Burckhardt and Greenblatt has already made clear, when we think about the history of Renaissance identities, we tend to hold them up as mirrors to ourselves, and what we see depends almost entirely upon where we stand. For Burckhardt, the Renaissance witnessed the birth of the modern individual; for Greenblatt, glimmerings of the postmodern self. I know that my own analysis is also shaped by my experience, but I am hopeful that my fascination and engagement with both literary theory and social history might at least provide a new perspective.

Before I delve into my analysis, I think it important to describe something of the background from which I approach this theme. In my work on an earlier book, a study of popular heresies in the sixteenth century, I carried out most of my research in the archives of the tribunal of the Roman Inquisition in Venice. It was, in fact, in the course of that research that I first encountered Paolo Veronese. For the most part, scholars have explored and continue to mine this rich and enticing collection of documents for evidence of the religious history and practices of those who were accused of heresy in northern Italy in the age of the Reformation, and this is more or less what I did as well.<sup>12</sup> But, as I read further in the trials of the Inquisition, I was increasingly intrigued both by the ways in which the inquisitors posed their questions and in

\* This characterization is necessarily provisional. As I will argue below, it is misleading to conceive of an 'internal' as opposed to an 'external' self. The self was and is inevitably a relation between what is perceived as inner experience (emotions, beliefs, thoughts, and so on) and the outside world (society, culture, politics, and so on).

Public/Private

Machiavelli's approach  
When

why  
this  
text

perception?

which the heretics or those suspected of heresy responded. Inevitably, the issue of identity emerged as a salient historical problem. The courtroom was, after all, a site hyper-charged with issues of self-revelation and concealment, with pre-existing assumptions about the receptivity of certain groups such as cobblers, printers, weavers to new religious and possibly heretical ideas and the predisposition of other social groups such as poor, widowed, or immigrant women to various forms of witchcraft. Gradually I came to see that to study the inquisitorial records as a means of trying to deepen our grasp of the question of identity in the Renaissance would be both valuable and original. Such study would offer a new perspective on a problem that many have discussed through the lens of literature and especially such canonical works as *The Book of the Courtier* and *Hamlet*, on the one hand, and that others have examined from the perspective of social history, with particular emphasis on the history of the family, on the other. To be sure, my own focus is not entirely archival. I too make use of important printed texts from the sixteenth century – some, like Stefano Guazzo's *Civil Conversation*, relatively well known, others like the treatises on exorcism by Girolamo Menghi, Guazzo's contemporary, nearly forgotten. Nonetheless, the records of the Venetian Holy Office, in the end, serve as the center of gravity in the narratives and analyses that follow.

As I read more and more trials, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that modern and/or postmodern notions of the individual first emerged in the Renaissance. Both views struck me as hopelessly teleological, especially since so many changes – the growth of European power throughout much of the western world, the development of Puritanism, the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, industrialization, the romantic movement, and the explosive expansion of information and medical technologies – have intervened so consequentially between the age of Veronese and our own. It seems absurd to try to connect the developments in western Europe five hundred or so years ago to either nineteenth- or twentieth-century ideas about identity. In short, I became acutely aware that we have tended – whether we are modernists or postmodernists – to treat the Renaissance self as the origin of our own notion of identity.

Before turning to the history of Renaissance identities, it is also crucial to say something about these myths, both what they are and how they came into existence. The term 'individualism' is a relative newcomer to English and other European languages. It first appeared in French in

the 1820s and 1830s. In its earliest known appearance, the Catholic and arch-conservative Joseph de Maistre, a prolific writer, lamented in a text published in 1821 what he saw as a 'deep and frightening division of minds, this infinite fragmentation of all doctrines, political Protestantism carried to the most absolute individualism (*individualisme*).'<sup>13</sup> Ever since the term came into fashion, nearly two hundred years ago, it has, of course, meant different things to different people. Often – especially in the first few decades of its use – it had a negative connotation and pointed to the breakdown of community, as de Maistre's quotation makes clear. Alexis de Tocqueville – who did much to popularize the term – generally shared with his French contemporaries a negative view of individualism, though in his *Democracy in America* he took a somewhat more optimistic position, since he believed that in the United States voluntary associations such as churches, town meetings, literary guilds, and civic groups both protected the individual from a potentially overbearing state and became themselves guarantors of liberty by serving as miniature republics in which self-interested individuals would be transformed into 'orderly, temperate, moderate, and self-controlled citizens.'<sup>14</sup> In Germany, by contrast, the Romantic tradition tended to embrace the values of individual genius and represented individuality as something which included 'uniqueness, originality, self-realization.'<sup>15</sup>

Burckhardt, a Swiss scholar, drew on both these perspectives – German and French – and resolved the tension between them from a patently elitist perspective.<sup>16</sup> Among the well-educated, the well-rounded, and the wealthy, he celebrated the individual. But he feared the swarming individualism of the masses, and his book on the Renaissance is filled with conflicting images. Certain ambiguities continued to haunt the term for a long while, but throughout most of the twentieth century (especially in liberal democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom), it acquired and preserved a positive connotation. Writers saw individualism as foundational to political and legal freedoms, as well as to culture and capitalism. Ambition, entrepreneurship, competition, and the self-made 'man' were dominant, uncontested values in search of an origin story. Only recently have scholars and political activists, philosophers and social critics begun to question the viability of the individual as the foundation of political, cultural, and social life.<sup>17</sup>

Already when Burckhardt was writing his famous book, he became one of several major historians, philosophers, and social theorists who located the origins of the modern notion of the individual in the late

origin

medieval or the early modern world. The nineteenth century was, in fact, largely defined by the growing recognition that traditional solidarities – communal, familial, and religious – had broken down. The rush of workers into the cities in the midst of the Industrial Revolution – and the demands for democratic institutions in the wake of the American and French revolutions – made the question of the individual and his or her role in society one of the most pressing issues of the day. Romantic writers especially connected the dissolution of their own society with the breakup of the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance emerged as a natural candidate for the site of the emergence of individualism, an individualism condemned by many as evidence of the erosion of traditional institutions of authority such as the (Roman) Church and the Crown but gradually embraced by others as a form of liberation. Even before Burckhardt published his celebrated book on the Renaissance, the great French historian Jules Michelet had offered a positive view of the emergence of individualism as a value in this period, while in England, before Burckhardt's book found a large readership there, both John Addington Symonds and Walter Pater viewed Renaissance individualism in a positive light.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, first published in 1856, de Tocqueville observed that the 'word "individualism" which we have coined for our own requirements was unknown to our ancestors, for the good reason that in those days every individual necessarily belonged to a group and no one could regard himself as an isolated unit.'<sup>19</sup> By 'those days', de Tocqueville was, of course, referring to what was for him the relatively recent past, the period before the French Revolution when privileges and rights were generally secured by membership in a corporate body – the Church, the aristocracy, a guild, a village, and so on. De Tocqueville recognized with clarity that the French Revolution had dismantled this system and shifted rights increasingly to the individual – the very foundation of modern society: in economic life, in politics, and in laws guaranteeing personal liberties.

De Tocqueville's observations about individualism are in exquisite conflict with many of the most basic assumptions Renaissance scholars have long made about their field. After all, traditional Renaissance scholarship – whether focused on society and politics or on literature and/or art – has often made claims about the rise of individualism. This scholarship has been particularly inclined to locate modern notions of individualism in portraiture and biography and, even more strongly, in self-portraiture and autobiography.<sup>20</sup> It has discerned something of the outlines of the modern individual in changing social

and cultural patterns: in the rise of new forms of trade and commerce, in new notions of government, and even in new religious practices and beliefs. It has also found seemingly powerful evidence of its existence in great literature: in Petrarch's *Secretum*, Montaigne's *Essays*, or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Traditional Renaissance scholarship has often made the case for the significance of the Renaissance on the grounds that this period constituted a dramatic watershed in western history during which not only individualism but also several other major defining traits of the modern world – capitalism and republicanism, realism and humanism – first made themselves felt.<sup>21</sup> Paradoxically, these claims – now often discarded as constituent parts of the modernist version of the myth that portrayed the Renaissance individual as a relatively autonomous and humanist self – have been preserved by many postmodern critics who find in the Renaissance 'subject' a precursor to our own contemporary views of the self as divided, fragmented, even illusory.

Both the modern and postmodern narratives, moreover, have proven enormously powerful in shaping not only the way scholars continue to view the period we study but also the general shape of western history as well; and these studies, in turn, have exercised considerable influence over popular views of both the Renaissance and history in general.<sup>22</sup> But, as my allusion to de Tocqueville suggests, traditional claims about Renaissance individualism are by no means uncontested.

In fact, no other single aspect of the modern view of the Renaissance has been subject to attacks from so many different quarters. For one thing, as many medievalists have observed, the study of Renaissance notions of identity has often been based on a baffling indifference to what came before. Indeed, much scholarly writing – in history, in art history, but perhaps especially in literary theory – has tended to assume that questions of identity and interiority developed for the first time in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. In an important critique of this trend, the Yale medievalist and literary scholar Lee Patterson took aim at Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. What was disturbing to Patterson was Greenblatt's decision to ignore any writer prior to Sir Thomas More (1478–1535). To Patterson, this decision constituted a deliberate use of the Middle Ages as 'premodernity, the other that must be rejected for the modern self to be and know itself.' 'That medieval texts do not figure in these discussions', Patterson continues, 'is precisely the point: the Middle Ages is not a subject for discussion but the rejected object, not a prehistory whose shape can be described but the history – historicity itself – that

Solidarity  
diminishes

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the modern must reject in order to be itself.<sup>23</sup> At the very least, it is crucial that we approach the subject of the Renaissance notion of the self with an awareness that representations of interiority or inwardness, not to mention ideas of agency, willfulness, and integrity, were richly developed among medieval elites, especially within literary, monastic, and scholastic circles. More than 50 years ago, Richard Southern, in his influential *The Making of the Middle Ages*, alluded to 'the emergence of the individual from his communal background' as one of the characteristic changes of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a view that many medievalists continue to maintain.<sup>24</sup> If, therefore, we intend to write about Renaissance notions of the self, it would be a false problem to assume that it was in fifteenth-century Italy or sixteenth-century England that issues of interiority and identity were first articulated.<sup>25</sup> We may often portray Renaissance humanists as the heirs of antiquity, but Renaissance humanists also knew well the works of their medieval antecedents. For even more than their medieval ancestors, they read and studied the writings of St. Augustine; and they were familiar with major medieval writers such as St. Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Lombard, and St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>26</sup>

But it is not only medievalists who have dismissed the Burckhardtian view of the Renaissance individual as a myth; many postmodern critics have done much the same, without, however, recognizing that much of their own work is patently genealogical. For, paradoxically, the postmodernists have been equally preoccupied with uncovering in the Renaissance world the origins of the postmodern self, even if at times the genealogy is explicit, as when Greenblatt writes, 'We continue to see in the Renaissance the shaping of crucial aspects of our sense of self and society', adding '[t]o experience Renaissance culture is to feel what it was like to form our identity, and we are at once more rooted and more estranged by the experience.'<sup>27</sup>

When I use the term 'myth' here (and in my title), I use it quite self-consciously in a moderate sense. That is, I do not believe that it is useful to dismiss the idea that something did change in the ways in which it became possible to think about the self in the Renaissance – and that the something that did change does have certain affinities to both modern and postmodern representations of identity. It is not my claim, therefore, that myths of the Renaissance individual are entirely false. I am not arguing for the total divorce of history from myth – a move that is likely to fail in any case. Nonetheless – and here my thinking has been informed primarily by the anthropological study of

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myth – I believe that the 'truth value' of the Burckhardtian myth lay above all in the function it served in the late nineteenth and throughout most of the twentieth century: it provided an explanation, a seemingly plausible one, for the origins of modern notions of individualism and explicitly linked those notions to broader economic, political, cultural, religious, and artistic formations.<sup>28</sup> In a similar fashion, the postmodern version of the myth preserves the significance of the Renaissance as a major turning point in western history while nonetheless offering an account of identity that resonates deeply with our current postmodern condition. Both of these myths often overlap with history. But neither is history. The history of the Renaissance self – or rather, a historical description of Renaissance notions of selfhood – is another matter altogether – and it is this matter that I attempt to address in this book.

Paradoxically, if the concept of 'Renaissance individualism' is now much in dispute, the history of identity in this period has grown all the more compelling and all the more interesting.<sup>29</sup> That is, the effort to make sense of how Renaissance men and women thought about themselves and their place in the larger social order (or even in the larger cosmic order) has become a salient and compelling historical question that is at the center of much of the research on this period. This book reaps something of the harvest of this new research and at the same time attempts to examine the history of identity (or more properly 'identities'), with special attention to the sixteenth century. I hope to show that by exploring the history of identities in the Renaissance from a new perspective – in particular, from over the shoulders of inquisitors – that the formations of the self we encounter in the Renaissance are radically at odds with not only Burckhardt's but also Greenblatt's authorized version.

Unlike the culture of the seventeenth century – when western European culture, at least among its elites, finally had been transformed in its most basic assumptions not only by the growth and spread of Protestantism but also by a revitalized Catholicism – the culture of the Renaissance never fostered a sense of a clearly bounded self. To the contrary, Renaissance identities (no matter which particular form they assumed) were almost always anxious identities, uncertain about the nature of the boundaries between what not only well-known writers and artists but also ordinary men and women viewed as a kind of wall between the inner and the outer 'self.' Was this boundary – often identified either literally or metaphorically with the skin enveloping the body – something that linked one person, by the logic

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identities at odds with B. + G.

not clearly bounded  
max. i. w. w. absent boundary

inner v.s. outer self

of resemblance (facial features, hair color, and so on), to family, craft, city, and nation? Or was this boundary a screen, by contrast, behind which one should (or should not) conceal one's thoughts and beliefs? And, if it was a screen, were there ways of penetrating it, whether through performances or through sincerity, or by trying to connect with others, to overcome a sense of isolation or alienation, and to forge a sense of community? Or, finally, was the boundary, as still others seemed to think, something remarkably permeable – a fleshy but porous membrane through which demons and spirits could pass almost of their own will or through the deliberate manipulations of a witch or a magus? Renaissance identities, that is, were less about adopting a particular stance to the world than about the question of how different stances might affect one's relations to the world and, in particular, one's relation to other human beings. To approach the history of Renaissance identities in this fashion enables us, I believe, to grasp something of the history of Renaissance selves on their own terms and not as anticipations of more modern or postmodern forms of selfhood.<sup>30</sup> In a closing 'Essay', I will return to the issue of the 'myth of Renaissance individualism', suggesting some of the reasons why this myth remained so important through the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, and why new myths of Renaissance identity, as we entered the late twentieth century, seemed to be taking its place. Here my objective is not to explain the myth but rather to offer a historical account of the Renaissance self.

In the study of the history of Renaissance identities that follows, I approach the self not as a thing (the soul, the heart, the mind, the *res cogitans*, or the like) but rather as a relation. The self, on this account, is not 'a ghost in the machine' or a puppeteer directing our outer movements and expressions. It is even less substantial than the diminutive man Dorothy and her companions discovered, when Toto pulled back the curtain, in one of the closing scenes to *The Wizard of Oz*. We might open the body, but we will find no 'self' within. The self has no physical location; it is not our 'core'; rather, it is discerned most clearly as a relation between those dimensions of experience that people describe as *internal* (conscious or unconscious thoughts, feelings, beliefs, emotions, desires) and those they describe as *external* (speaking or writing, hating or loving, praying or blaspheming, laughing or crying, stealing or buying, and so on).<sup>31</sup> And, in positing such a topography of experience, the body invariably plays a fundamental role; for it is the outer covering of the body – its skin – that serves as a

privileged frontier between these two distinct spheres of experience. The notion that the self is relational is, of course, not a novel idea. In Renaissance France, Montaigne wrote in his *Essays* that 'we are all patchwork ... and there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others.'<sup>32</sup> In several of his more philosophical works, Marx analysed the self as a *Gattungswesen*, a social being; but the most familiar and most influential formulation of the relational self is undoubtedly Freud's.<sup>33</sup> To Freud, the self is the dynamic set of relations. He envisioned the ego not as a thing in itself but rather as that often powerless 'charioteer' that struggles to negotiate the conflicting demands of the id (our sexual and aggressive instincts) with the imperatives of the superego (the ethical demands of culture or civilization itself).<sup>34</sup> As Peter Gay has observed, 'Freud made it plain that psychoanalysis, for all its uncompromising individualism, cannot explain the inner life without recourse to the external world.'<sup>35</sup> But Freud's representation of the self is, ultimately, only one of many different possible descriptions of the relation between the experience of interiority and the external world, albeit one that has had powerful claims on how many have understood this relation since the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore – and this is a point central to my argument – both modern and postmodern notions of the self are similarly themselves simply two of the many possible permutations of the relational self, though we might add that they are the single two most distinctive forms of this relation as it has developed over the last five hundred years. Reading Burckhardt in this light, we might say that to him the modern individual is one in which the 'subjective' or the internal side of one's identity is that of an active and willful agent, a maker, and a relatively autonomous and self-conscious person endowed with the ability to make important choices as it navigates the external world, often with an eye to its own advantage. This is the 'individual' of bourgeois humanism – indeed, it is what most of us still mean when we use the word 'individual' in our everyday speech – and it was certainly the most prominent representation of modern 'man' in Burckhardt's own day. But I do not understand why we should continue to believe that it is a useful model for understanding the Renaissance self in which the relation between interiority and society generally assumed radically different and variegated forms, and identity was not about individuality but rather explicitly about the problem of the relation of one's inner experience to one's experience in the world. Moreover, when we read more recent postmodern interpretations of Renaissance identities in light of

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the relational self I propose here, we find a similar limitation. The post-modern self is one in which the social world not only takes priority but actually dominates any experience of interiority or inwardness. Thus, rather than viewing the self as a free subject shaping his or her world, the subject becomes an artifact or a fiction, and a sense of inwardness is viewed as an illusion, even a fantasy. For self-fashioning, to Greenblatt, is not the way in which autonomous subjects fashioned themselves but rather the way in which specific political and religious centers of authority (the monarchy or the church, for example) created the fiction of individual autonomy and/or interiority. Several other postmodern literary critics hold this or similar views.<sup>37</sup> But, again, I do not see how this postmodern model of identity, which may have some validity for illuminating the construction of the self in our own time, elucidates Renaissance identities more accurately than did Burckhardt's modern interpretation of the self, since – to reiterate – the relation of interiority to the social world in the Renaissance developed on its own terms.

The historical study of identity – and this is the foundational assumption of this book – should not begin from the presupposition that the self in a given historical period is either modern or postmodern – unless, perhaps, it is either the modern or the postmodern world that we are seeking to understand. Historical study should begin with the sources – a humanist move *ad fontes* – and examine the ways in which they explain or describe the relation between the internal dimensions of experience, on the one hand, and its external dimensions, on the other. This may at first seem a daunting task, but Renaissance texts – published and archival, religious and secular – are filled with efforts to make sense of this relation. It is certainly a recurring, if not the dominant theme in the Renaissance theater, in contemporary spiritual writings, in anatomical writings, and, as I shall show in this book, in inquisitorial proceedings as well.

Indeed, it is the thesis of this book that the Renaissance self, while protean, was almost always understood as the enigmatic relation of the interior life to life in society. The dynamic I am proposing presumes neither the priority of the internal to the external life nor the priority of the external to the internal life. What seems to have been at stake in the Renaissance was rather the fundamental question of how the relation between these two realms should be understood or, when there was conflict between them, resolved. To be sure, some writers in the Renaissance did argue for the priority of the internal dimensions of identity, as we see, for example, in humanist treatises on the will, or on

authorship. But this emphasis was the exception, not the rule. When Renaissance people grappled with the question of identity, they rarely thought of it either as an expression of a shaping self from within or as a distillation of social forces. On the contrary, they were aware of multiple possible permutations that the relation between the internal and the external dimensions of experience could assume. The presence of interiority was felt in many spheres: when a courtier was pressured to conceal his thoughts at court, when a demon took possession of one's faculties or desires, when a man seduced a woman, or when a sinner was confronted by temptations and a struggle of the will ensued. It was also possible to experience the loss of interiority. In the Renaissance we find descriptions of such loss both in literary descriptions of certain forms of madness and in a variety of treatises on melancholia. In his famous book on this second theme, the eccentric English clergyman Robert Burton described certain of the insane as those who 'wake, as others dreame', while in Lodovico Ariosto's sixteenth-century epic *Orlando Furioso*, madness is described as, among other things, a state of alienation, in which the self becomes 'divided from what it once was.'<sup>38</sup> Or madness might include delusions, such as those of the baker from the Italian city of Ferrara who believed his body was made of butter and stubbornly refused to sit in the sun out of fear that he would melt.<sup>39</sup> To Renaissance observers, as to us, the loss of self-awareness could be a catastrophic event. It was, after all, the loss of a sense of inwardness, one of the two essential elements that go into the make-up of the relational self.

In the argument that follows, therefore, I start from the presupposition that social experience and a certain experience of inwardness are both crucial to understanding Renaissance notions of identity. The result is an account that points, first, to far more variegated forms of identity in Renaissance Europe than either Burckhardtian notions of individualism or the more recent ideas about 'self-fashioning' are capable of embracing. The sorts of selves we encounter in the Renaissance were not the calm, well-demarked, accomplished, autonomous selves that the Burckhardtian myth implies; and they were far more willful and autonomous and far less fragmented and illusory than many postmodern critics have claimed. First, most Renaissance men and women were not detached from social groups and networks, from the family and the parish or the guild and confraternity, and, even when they were, they generally felt compelled to enter into associations in which it would be possible to find some mooring for their beliefs. Identities, that is, could be defined by social

no priority

Conflict at internal + external

they rarely thought of it

etc.

two pieces

in contrast

location but also by a self-conscious awareness of the complexity of community. Moreover, Renaissance people were never as certain about their identities as the term 'individualism' implies. They lived in a culture that valued theatricality and emphasized the importance of self-presentation, performance, and rhetoric, but not, as many postmodernists have tended to assume, at the expense of a self-consciousness about interior experience or inwardness or the tensions that existed between such inwardness and one's stance in the world. Finally, many Renaissance men and women had little sense of the self as a necessarily bounded and well-demarked thing: a single body containing a single soul. On the contrary, in their religious beliefs and in their notions of witchcraft, they saw the self as something extremely fluid or migratory, not even necessarily connected to one particular body. They had, as we shall see, a porous notion of the body, one in which the soul or the spirit – in a magical act, in an act of erotic or divine love, or in a case of possession – could easily slip into another's body or, on occasion, escape from one's own. What was porous in such beliefs was, of course, the skin, the flesh, or the body itself.

Ultimately it was this anxiety about the boundaries of the body – about the frontier between the internal and external dimensions of experience – that enabled the development of an elaborate discourse in the Renaissance about interiority. To be sure, Renaissance people may have imagined inwardness in a culturally-specific fashion. But the Renaissance experience of inwardness was not purely a cultural construction. On the contrary, inwardness was and is a necessary dimension of embodiment. Our hearts, which throb, and our brains, which are eerily silent, are inside us; our cells are either inside us or cover us; and these organs invariably give shape to the notion that in our experience in the world we, like young Prince Hamlet, 'have that within which passes show.' Like many Renaissance men and women, we too are most likely to confront the essential role of that which is within when it is lost. Of course, what precisely is lost and the degree to which it is biologically-determined are both matters of debate; what does not seem to be a matter of debate is that it is something humans possess and that it can be lost. Most of us have likely witnessed its disappearance. I personally have observed its loss too many times: in a parent who, in the terrifying aftermath of a heart attack, fell into a coma; in an autistic child; and in a loved one suffering first from dementia and then from Alzheimer's disease. Clearly, on a personal level, the apprehension of such losses is inevitably painful, but it is precisely by studying such impairments that cognitive psychologists and

neuroscientists are enabled to offer certain explanations of the biological bases for at least a certain degree of self-consciousness in all humans.<sup>40</sup> But even without scientific training, it is often quite plain that once these faculties are lost in their entirety that the self is lost also. Cultures accordingly may interpret the experience of inwardness in different ways, but the scripts are not written onto a blank slate; they are written onto a complex organism already capable of thought, feeling, emotion, and desire. It would be a fallacy to argue that there is something within (the soul, the spirit, the psyche) that represents the self. But it would equally be a fallacy to argue that the self is determined purely by one's experience in the world and by the social forces one encounters from early childhood to the end of one's life. As Caroline Walker Bynum has noted in her study of identity in the Middle Ages, it is useful and important to find 'images to think with that do not force us to choose between mind and body, inner and outer, biology and society, essence and agency.'<sup>41</sup> The analysis I present below of 'scenes' from the inquisition will also, I hope, make the dualism implicit in so many of the recent discussions of Renaissance identities seem equally misleading.

This book, then, does not look back to Renaissance in order to understand the origins of either modern or postmodern notions of the self so much as to understand fifteenth- and sixteenth-century people on their own terms. I have approached this world, therefore, in much the same manner that an anthropologist might study a foreign culture. I have tried to 'listen' to the voices and decode the performances of both men and women from this distant age, and I have attempted to find the characteristic ways in which they made sense of their identities and their relations to others. In the end, the selves I portray are not the apparently modern or postmodern figures that we often assume were the norm in this age.

Sixteenth-century selfhood was, in fact, something far more elusive – indeed it is something tantalizingly difficult to grasp. To be sure, for many, one's identity was largely prescribed by the larger social groups (family, guild, community) to which one belonged. Nonetheless, European culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was shaped to no small degree by struggles over questions of identity, even questions of collective identity. This was as true among popular groups as it was among the elite. And if we intend to understand this period, we need to know not only about the deeds and ideas of great men (princes, humanists, artists, and great writers) but also the ways in which ordinary men

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and women, rich as well as poor, understood themselves and their place in the world. You might approach this book therefore as a kind of retrospective cosmology of the vast majority of men and women who lived in the sixteenth century, a book that you might like to read if indeed you intended, through the magic of time travel, to visit Europe as it was some five hundred years ago and actually make sense of the conversations that you might have with the people you would meet there. My assumption is that the past is a foreign country and that we do better approaching it on its own terms. Finally – since the topic is vast – what I offer here is not a systematic cosmology so much as a number of case studies of Renaissance ideas of the self.

## 2

### The Inquisitors' Questions

evidence = portrait

But how, in a time without photographs, with few portraits, without tape recorders, without fingerprinting, without identity cards, without birth certificates, with parish records still irregular if kept at all – how did one establish a person's identity beyond all doubt?

Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, 1983

In 1529 or 1530 Lorenzo Lotto, one of the most engaging and prolific artists of the Renaissance, completed a portrait of the jeweler Bartolomeo Carpan, a successful man who had a shop in the Ruga degli Orefici not far from the Rialto Bridge and who would become a major figure in the evangelical movement in Venice for over thirty years.<sup>1</sup> On one level, it is precisely such vivid and strikingly realistic portraits as this one that have led many scholars to see in them evidence of the Renaissance discovery of the individual. And, to be sure, such portraits were intended as likenesses of particular persons. Bartolomeo's family members, friends, and acquaintances would have recognized him in the painting. Moreover, the artist Lotto had used his craft to point to a sense of psychological depth. Bartolomeo's eyes, wide open, do not meet our own, but it is difficult not to read them as external reflections of some interior trait; though what that trait is – sadness or thoughtfulness, arrogance or intelligence – we simply do not know.

portrait  
↓  
self  
likeness  
depth

But this painting is not a portrait of an individual isolated from the larger social context. To perceive it in such a manner is to miss many of the social dimensions evoked in this representation, to overlook the social framework into which the artist went out of his way, as he always did in his portraits, to place his subject. First, the portrait, by its

portrait + relationships