

While keeping in mind that new historicism is a collection of practices rather than a school or a method, it may be useful to attempt a list of its distinguishing characteristics:

- 1 New historicists think of culture as a semiotic system, as a network of signs.
- 2 They, therefore, are resistant to disciplinary hegemony, finding in interdisciplinarity an important means of generating new knowledge.
- 3 They are persistently aware that history is both what happened in the past (a set of events) and an account of those events (a story); historical truth arises from a critical reflection on the adequacy of the story that is told.
- 4 History is, therefore, initially a kind of discourse, which is not a denial that there are real events.
- 5 A typical new historicist procedure is to begin with a striking event or anecdote, which has the effect of arousing skepticism about grand historical narratives or essentializing descriptions of a historical period such as the Renaissance. Anecdotes also arrest attention and provide what Greenblatt calls "the touch of the real."
- 6 New historicists are determinedly suspicious of unified, monolithic depictions of cultures or historical periods, insisting that there were countless Elizabethan world views but not a monolithic Elizabethan world picture. Typically such unified myths are created to serve a particular interest in the present, such as the longing for a golden past that Nietzsche calls "antiquarian history."
- 7 Because it is not possible to transcend one's own historical moment, all histories are themselves historically contingent on the present in which they are constructed.
- 8 New historicism is implicitly a critique of literary formalism (or "The New Criticism") that treated literary objects as ahistorical icons. The reexamination of the relationship between literature and history is a high priority for new historicists.
- 9 Just as it is no longer tenable to think of a literary text as a detached object that is independent of its author and readers, so also is it no longer possible to think of the past as an object that is detachable from its textual reconstruction.
- 10 It is also no longer tenable for students of literature to think of history as some sort of detachable background to iconic works of verbal (or other kinds of) art. History and literature are mutually imbricated.⁶

Two of Greenblatt's texts that readily illustrate these principles and assumptions are his magisterial *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which had a transformative impact on Renaissance studies, and his Introduction to *The Norton Shakespeare*, which is currently his most influential piece of public pedagogy. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* examines the perception, which has been part of Renaissance historiography since 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" (p. 1).