

The Drama of Memory in Shakespeare's History Plays

Isabel Karremann



This book analyses the drama of memory in Shakespeare's history plays. Situating the plays in relation to the extra dramatic contexts of early modern print culture, the Reformation and an emergent sense of nationhood, it examines the dramatic devices the theatre developed to engage with the memory crisis triggered by these historical developments. Against the established view that the theatre was a cultural site that served primarily to salvage memories, Isabel Karremann also considers the uses and functions of forgetting on the Shakespearean stage and in early modern culture. Drawing on recent developments in memory studies, historical formalism and performance studies, the volume develops a vocabulary and methodology for analysing Shakespeare's mnemonic dramaturgy in terms of the performance of memory that results in innovative readings of the English history plays. Karremann's book is of interest to researchers and upper-level students of Shakespeare studies, early modern drama and memory studies.

ISABEL KARREMANN is Professor of English Literature at Würzburg University, Germany. She is the co-editor of *Forgetting Faith? Negotiating Confessional Conflict in Early Modern Europe* (with Cornel Zwierlein and Inga Mai Groote, 2012), *Shakespeare in Cold War Europe: Conflict, Commemoration, Celebration* (with Erica Sheen, forthcoming, 2015) and *Forms of Faith: Literary Form and Religion in Early Modern England* (with Jonathan Baldo, forthcoming).

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- 1 Johann Philipp Abelin, *Theatrum Europaeum*, vol. II. *Historische Chronick oder Warhaffte Beschreibung aller vornehmen und denckwürdigen Geschichten: so sich hin und wider in der Welt von Anno Christi 1629 biß auff das Jahr 1633 zugetragen* (Franckfurt am Mayn: Merian, 1633), title engraving. Universitätsbibliothek der LMU München, Sig. 0900/ NN 1300 M561-2 Magazin.

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Note on the text

All Shakespearean texts are cited according to the following edition:

The Norton Shakespeare. Based on the Oxford Edition.
Eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard,
Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Quotations from Shakespeare's plays are references according to this edition, with act, scene and line numbers given in parentheses in the text.

All other references are given in the Bibliography section at the end.

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Introduction: forms of remembering and forgetting in early modern England and on the Shakespearean stage

The title engraving to Johann Philipp Abelin's second volume of his European history, the *Theatrum Europaeum* (1633), depicts early modern attitudes to the historiographical project of reconstructing the past in terms that are also at the core of this study about the drama of memory in Shakespeare's theatre. The centre of the picture is occupied by a rectangular stone table bearing the elaborate subtitle of the work: *The Continuation of Historical Chronicles or True Description of all Memorable Stories Having Occurred in Europe and other Places in the World, from the Year of Our Lord 1629 to 1633* (my translation). The engraved stone, a visual reference to the written nature of historical memory as well as to its durability, is surrounded by allegorical figures representing history, time and truth. Directly above it we see a winged stag carrying the figure of Time, a North European adaptation of Greek mythology, where the winged horse Pegasus carries the muses from Parnassus, among them Clio, the muse of historiography.¹ To the left, the figure of Historia as an old woman is teaching a child, her feet resting on a piece of marble inscribed 'Magistra Vitae'; on the right, the beautiful young figure of 'Lux Veritatis' is seen with a torch, bringing the light of Truth. This ensemble was a familiar topos in the iconography of early modern historiography. The title engraving to Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614), for example, features a similar pairing of History, Experience and Truth as opposed to Death and Oblivion, whose supine figures at the bottom of the picture provide the stepping-stones for a triumphant History, again addressed as 'Life's Mistress'. The engraving to Abelin's *Theatrum Europaeum* is likewise separated by a horizontal line: the lower part of the picture

¹ The mother of Clio was Mnemosyne, from whom the mnemonic art derives its name. Stuart Hampton-Reeves discusses depictions of Clio in early modern paintings and texts in his contribution to Cavanagh et al. (eds.), *Shakespeare's Histories and Counter-Histories*, 'Staring at Clio', pp. 1–5.

is occupied by a subterranean cave in which several figures crouch, half obscured by shadows, representing the enemies of historical truth. The sleeping female figures on the right-hand side embody oblivion, or forgetfulness.² In the middle background, cowering in the shadow, we see two half-naked, hirsute male figures in chains and with asses' ears on their heads, representing Inscitia, ignorance. An owl, the bird of wisdom, is perched – mockingly? – on a bough above them. On the left sit two female figures, also in chains, and wearing masks. The subscription identifies them as Mendacium, the lie. Their accessories, however, would invite yet another identification: they look similar to the masks that were used in ancient Greek drama. A European audience would have been familiar with such theatrical masks from medieval mystery plays or from the *commedia dell'arte* that originated in Renaissance Italy. If these masked figures recall the theatre – to its attackers nothing but an art of lying – then this raises the question of their specific relation to the figures mirroring them in the spatial arrangement of the picture, the embodiments of oblivion. The engraving implies that history and truth are opposed to forgetting and theatricality, an assumption that was often voiced also in antitheatrical tracts and as often refuted by defences of the stage, which habitually praised the theatre as a site of memory, truth and virtue.³

² On the early modern iconography of oblivion as a sleeping or dead figure, see William E. Engel's essay 'The decay of memory', where he discusses, among other examples, the title engraving to Raleigh's *History of the World*.

³ John Northbrooke, for example, associates the theatre with forgetfulness when he writes in *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine playes or Enterluds ... Are Reproved* (1577) that playgoers 'have no mind of any reformation or amendment of [their] life' (p. 25), and Stephen Gosson's *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582) calls for plays to 'bee banished, least ... little and little we forget God' (p. 193). The definitive study of antitheatrical literature is still Jonas Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1981); the essays by Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. and Zachariah Long in C. Ivic and G. Williams (eds.), *Lethe's Legacies*, pp. 41–52 and pp. 151–64 respectively, discuss early modern attacks on the stage specifically from the perspective of forgetting. The best-known defences of the stage in terms that identify it as a medium of memory (as well as morality) can be found in Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Pennilesse* (1592), where history plays are praised for raising 'our forefathers valiant acts ... from the Graue of Oblivion', inspiring the audience to follow their model (p. 86). Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* (1612) likewise insists that plays help to form ideal, obedient subjects through teaching them England's history, a lesson directly conducive to 'exhorting them to allegiance, dehorting them from all traitorous and felonious stratagems' (p. 494). For a more detailed discussion of antitheatrical literature and the language of memory, see chapter 3 of this study.