Shakespeare, Memory and Performance

Edited by Peter Holland

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PETER HOLLAND

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Acknowledgements

In a volume considering memory, it seems especially important to acknowledge – and thereby remember – the help that made this possible. These chapters began as papers for a conference, 'Shakespeare: Remembering Performance', held at the University of Notre Dame in November 2004 as the Inaugural Conference for the McMeel Family Chair in Shakespeare Studies. It was an opportunity to celebrate John and Susan McMeel's generosity in endowing the chair but the speakers also remember the McMeels' stamina in attending all the papers over the two days of the event. The conference was funded by the Office of the Provost, by the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts and by the Dee and Jim Smith Endowment for Excellence in Shakespeare and Performance. The support of all three of these segments of the University is gratefully acknowledged here, together with the individuals who embodied those parts of the whole: Provost Nathan Hatch, Professor Julia Braungart-Rieker, then Director of ISLA, and Ted Smith, Chair of the Performing Arts Advisory Council and founder of the Dee and Jim Smith Endowment. I must also remember here, with great gratitude, the extraordinary and calm efficiency of Harriet Baldwin in all aspects of the organization of the event.

The inclusion of so many illustrations in this volume was made possible by a subvention from the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, College of Arts and Letters, University of Notre Dame. My thanks to ISLA and to its Director, Gretchen Reydam-Schils. As always, working with Sarah Stanton at Cambridge University Press has been a real pleasure; she is, as so many Shakespeare scholars have had good cause to know and recall, the very best of editors, someone whose long experience and profound knowledge both of publishing and of Shakespeare studies have

combined in a remarkable way to enable our work to appear better than it may at times deserve.

Finally, I remember here and thank my wife Romana Huk. At a dinner for new incumbents of endowed chairs at Notre Dame in 2002, I was so carried away when I was describing the importance of theatre during my speech of thanks that I completely forgot to say how much Romana means in my life, not least in every aspect of my work. I hope this act of remembrance here will, in a very small part, make up for that 'too much memorable shame'. She has been the sharer in every step towards the creation of this volume, a journey which began with our move to Notre Dame; as for years we have shared very nearly every experience of watching Shakespeare on stage together, my memories of Shakespeare and performance are now hers and hers mine. The sharing of memory is a recurrent theme of this volume; Romana knows, I hope, exactly how much the sharing of memory can be a sign of the deepest love.

Foreword

Stanley Wells

REMEMBERING PERFORMANCE

How, if at all, can we memorialize performance? How can we re-create for ourselves and for others the impact that great actors and productions have had upon us? To modern readers the instinct to do so seems to be a natural one, as understandable as that of a painter to preserve the memory of real or imagined visual experience. But it is of relatively recent development. Audiences of Shakespeare's time had great experiences in the theatre. A few of them wrote in generalized terms of the pleasures that they experienced.

> So have I seen, when Caesar would appear,
> And on the stage at half-sword parley were
> Brutus and Cassius; O, how the audience
> Were ravished, with what wonder went they thence,
> When some new day they would not brook a line
> Of tedious though well-laboured *Catiline.*

That is Leonard Digges in his revision of verses originally printed in the First Folio. But who among these ravished and wondering audiences felt the impulse to fix their memories with any detail or precision, either for themselves or for others, in either words or visual images? The only writer I can think of is Simon Forman, and his accounts of performances at the Globe are fragmentary and designed, it would seem, rather for his own practical purposes, to remind him to beware of rogues like Autolycus. But at least there is a hint in his account of seeing *Macbeth* of the emotional impact that an actor – was it Richard Burbage? – made upon his imagination.

> The next night, being at supper with his noblemen whom he had bid to a feast to the which also Banquo should have come, he began

> to speak of 'noble Banquo', and to wish that he were there. And as he thus did, standing up to drink a carouse to him, the ghost of Banquo came and sat down in his chair behind him, and he turning about to sit down again saw the ghost of Banquo, which fronted him so that he fell into a great passion of fear and fury, uttering many words about his murder by which, when they heard that Banquo was murdered, they suspected Macbeth.

'A great passion of fear and fury' suggests that Forman was subliminally recalling Macbeth's description of life as 'a walking shadow' – the word was used for an actor – 'a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more', a tale 'full of sound and fury' (5.5.23–6). And Forman's description, besides giving precise information about the staging of the scene – Banquo's ghost really did appear – suggests that Burbage or his successor in the role performed with a naturalistic simulation of true passion. This is rudimentary theatre criticism.

In painting and drawing there is even less – the *Titus Andronicus* sketch, result of who knows what impulse, and a few drawings, engravings, or paintings of actors – Richard Tarlton and Will Kemp, Richard Burbage, John Lowin and Nathan Field, for the most part formal, unrelated to performance, only the drawing of Tarlton with his pipe and tabor giving even a faint impression of what he might have looked like in action as a performer.

Things look up a bit at the Restoration but, although for example Samuel Pepys loved theatre and recorded many visits to plays, he, who was marvellously well placed to do so, made scarcely any attempt to analyse the sources of the pleasure he took in performances by his favourites, Thomas Betterton and Edward Kynaston, Nell Gwyn and Elizabeth Knepp. And pictorial illustration of Shakespeare in performance does not start until the early eighteenth century, as in the illustrations to Rowe's edition of 1709 and, a little later, in paintings by Hogarth. It is only when we arrive at the age of Garrick that writers and artists begin with any frequency to translate their pleasure in performance into artistic terms. The rise of performance criticism and of the attempt to represent stage action visually, we must deduce, is inextricably bound up with the development both of sensibility in response to the arts, and of literary and other techniques for recording and conveying these impressions. The rise of the periodical essay as a literary form, and the subsequent, partly consequent, development of newspaper criticism and of emotional biography and autobiography, provided techniques and channels for the literary exploration of the

pleasure taken in performance by our earliest great writers on theatre, Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt conspicuous among them, and so for the fact that we have far fuller impressions of the impact of performances from the late eighteenth century onwards than for those of earlier times. The performances of Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble, of Edmund Kean and Dora Jordan, reverberate in our imaginations because of what was written about them and, to a lesser extent, because of visual images and archival reports. But in all the verbal and visual records these performances have passed through the transfiguring power of the imaginations and intellects of those who witnessed them. This is both a weakness and a strength. It is a weakness because it removes objectivity. The lens through which we witness these performances can distort as well as record. The critics are writing for effect; they may be more interested in coining a flashy phrase than in recording objective truth. They may even be influenced by personal likes and dislikes or by mercenary motives, as Hunt, in his *Autobiography*, accused his colleagues of being: 'what the public took for a criticism on a play was a draft upon the box-office, or reminiscences of last Thursday's salmon and lobster-sauce'. And inevitably reviewers select. Hazlitt's description of Edmund Kean's death as Richard III is a literary construct just as Harlow's painting of Mrs Siddons as Lady Macbeth or Lawrence's of Kemble as Coriolanus is a subjective work of art. But their very subjectivity is in itself a strength as well as a weakness. We should gain no impression of the impact of the performances that gave rise to them if they did not at the same time tell us, or convey to us through the eloquence of their prose, or the power of their composition, something of the emotional and intellectual impact that they had upon their creators and which is the fundamental source of the value we place upon theatre.

Since the Romantic period, mechanical recording devices have transformed the historicization of performance. We can hear (if only through a horn scratchily) what Edwin Booth and Ellen Terry, Henry Irving and Beerbohm Tree sounded like – at least in the difficult conditions of the primitive recording studio. In more recent times performances by John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier, Judi Dench and Kenneth Branagh have been far more accurately caught. The coming of film, both silent and audible, added a new dimension. But it has not been all gain. Film is a medium in its own right, and one which, unlike theatre, creates an immutable text. If we think of it as a means of preserving performances of the past – and all performances belong to the past as soon as they are given – we are in danger of being deluded. Russell Jackson writes below of the 'desire on the part of audiences to be able to

enjoy individual performances – Olivier's Richard III, for example – which have long since ceased to be available "live"'. I saw Olivier play Richard III on stage, and I know how that performance fed into his film made a few years later, and I can still see the film with pleasure and admiration, but it does not substitute in my memory for the performance that I saw when I was an undergraduate. As Dennis Kennedy writes in this volume, 'film and video are always partial witnesses, recording only what the camera can see or the operator has chosen to see, denying the force and atmosphere of live performance: they are transformatively false to what they appear to document'. At least Olivier's Richard III was fully translated into the film medium, unlike his Othello which I saw on stage in 1964. The filming of that performance, which took place in a studio over a period of only a few days, is more accurate as a record of the way the play was staged but it is infinitely less true to the audience's experience; a falsification because it remains a stage performance imperfectly translated to the medium of film, growing ever more dated with the passage of time. To see it with an audience of people who never saw Olivier in the theatre is acutely embarrassing.

For all the limitations of literary responses to performance, at least they record the impression created, if only on one individual, at the time the performance was given. Performance is not an objective phenomenon. It reaches out to an audience and is incomplete without the audience's reactions. It deserves to be judged by the impact it has in its own time, unaffected by changes in fashion – in styles of costume and haircuts, of vocal and gestural technique. If we are interested purely and simply in the external appurtenances of the theatrical event, then mechanical recording media may satisfy our needs. But if we want to know how it felt to be there, what it was like to be in the presence of Kean or Irving, Olivier or Edith Evans, the contribution made by the written word – assisted maybe by the visual artist – is indispensable.

Contents

List of illustrations