OXFORD SHAKESPEARE TOPICS

Shakespeare & Memory

HESTER LEES-JEFFRIES

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GENERAL EDITORS: PETER HOLLAND AND STANLEY WELLS

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First Edition published in 2013

Impression: 1

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN 978–0–19–967426–8 (Hbk)
978–0–19–967425–1 (Pbk)

Printed in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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In memory of my father, Peter,
for Laura and Benjamin, my niece and nephew,
and for my students.

say thank you thank you thank you for the then, and now

Acknowledgements

In 2003 I heard Peter Stallybrass give a paper about *Hamlet*, memory, and erasable writing surfaces. Afterwards I remember talking with Pippa Berry and saying, but Ophelia's memory's different, isn't it? That paper, and that conversation, formed the starting point of this book, although it took me a long time to do anything about it. I explored earlier versions of some material in seminars at the Cambridge International Shakespeare Summer School in 2005, and in a lecture series in the Cambridge University Faculty of English in 2007–9, and my teaching for the Shakespeare and early modern papers has informed the whole book. I was delighted when Peter Holland and Stanley Wells accepted my proposal for a volume in the Shakespeare Topics series, and I started the proper business of writing in summer 2010.

Two things happened that summer, however, that both delayed the book and profoundly changed it. I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and (the same day, give or take a time zone) the first of a series of massive earthquakes struck my home town, Christchurch, New Zealand. There have been thousands of aftershocks, and a second major earthquake on 22 February 2011 killed more than 180 people: the city where I grew up has largely been destroyed. One of the things that this book explores is the way in which memory is not simply about the past, but often reflects profound uncertainties about the future, and uncertainty colours all aspects of life for those who have lived through earthquakes, or cancer. The Sonnets look different when ruins, mortality, and posterity have acquired unexpectedly personal resonances.

I hope that, in the circumstances, the reader will forgive the extended and sometimes personal nature of these acknowledgements. I began some of the initial work when I was a research fellow at Magdalene College, Cambridge. An early career fellowship at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) in the Easter Term of 2011 enabled me to get on with writing the book after my sick leave. I have profited from conversations about memory and cognition with Raphael Lyne, about

neuroscience with Jeff Dalley, and about (medieval and early modern) death with Eamon Duffy and Carl Watkins. Tiffany Stern and Georgianna Ziegler helped me to track down a picture of writing tables at the very last minute, and Robert Bearman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust was very helpful on the architectural details of the Guild Chapel. Curators and archivists at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Longleat House made sourcing illustrations straightforward, as did Matt Applewhite at Nick Hern Books. Peter Holland has been a tremendously kind series editor, and Jacqueline Baker has been very enthusiastic and supportive as commissioning editor; Jenny Townsend and Rachel Platt at OUP have also been extremely helpful.

My illness allowed me to see collegiate Cambridge at its best. The fellows, staff, and students of St Catharine's are my *whanau*, and I thank Alan Battersby, Glen Cavaliero, Chris Clark, Richard Dance, Lucy Delap, Mark Elliott, Eilís Ferran, Robert Gordon, Ron Martin, Rose Melikan, John Thompson, Peter Turner, and John Xuereb in particular for their sensitive solicitousness and kindness. Jean Thomas was and is the most gracious and charismatic of Masters. My friends and colleagues in Catz English Paul Hartle and Caroline Gonda sorted out cover for my teaching at very short notice, and were among my staunchest allies. Dom Mulcrone and the porters did a great deal to make my life easier. Cambridge friends who supported me most fiercely through foul weather included Abi Brundin, Anthony Moore, Philip Oliver, Jane Partner, Aude Fitzsimons, Isobel Maddison, Angus Vine, Dan Wakelin, and Joel Harvey, and Carl Watkins and Dan Wilton, and my former students Sarah Howe, Lucy Razzall, and Ned Allen. Jane Hughes was especially good, and generous, at organizing outings. Pippa Berry, Juliet Fleming, and Stephanie Trigg particularly understood the need to think and write through the experience of illness and, via email and in person, reminded me of the inseparability of the life of the body from that of the mind. My students, past and present, gave me one of my most compelling incentives for getting better simply by being their bright, passionate selves, especially Vanessa Quigg, Edward Herring, Zeljka Marosevic, Conrad Steel, Eliot D'Silva, Charlotte Knight, Jen Barham, David Clinton, and Owen Holland at St Catharine's, and the 'Lucy Ladies' (of Lucy Cavendish), particularly Florence Hazrat.

My sister, Susannah, her husband, Mark, and my niece, Laura, provided much practical support and welcome distraction; my nephew, Benjamin, was born a year to the day after both earthquake and diagnosis. Friends and family in New Zealand and elsewhere kept me going, especially my aunt Clare Lamberg (herself a 'survivor') and my extended family, Margaret Quigley (another one), and my godmother, Judith Lee, and her husband, Allen, who died just as I was finishing this book. London friends Catherine Rainey, Sue and Peter Sheriff, Chris Bowen and Janna Kenny, and especially Kit Grover and Keith Lewis, did many kind, cheering things. My chances of staying alive are better because I was treated at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, where I continue to have superb care from my gentle, humane surgeon, Parto Forouhi, my astonishing oncologist, Luke Hughes-Davies, who always had time to listen, explain, and reassure, the specialist nurses on the clinical trials team and in the Oncology Day Unit, the district nurses, and especially Sharon Iddles and Alison Hallett, who remain only a phone call away, and are skilled, perceptive, and kind.

Books and illnesses are long hauls. My mother, Sarah, missed the first earthquake by three days because she got on a plane when my diagnosis was all but confirmed; she stayed for nine months and I could not have survived without her. Some of the people who stuck by me most constantly and lovingly were Nicole Moreham and Emily Brodie (both always at the end of the phone in the antipodes), Miranda Griffin, who sustained me with such sweetness, good humour, and wisdom, Helen Cooper, who, in the midst of chairing the English Faculty, still made time to phone, visit, listen, and provide books (and who read this one in manuscript), Jane Grogan, sister in Spenser and *Histories* accomplice, and Gavin Alexander, who gave me work to do, endlessly talked things through, distracted me, and understood. If the dedication were not already full, this book would be for all of them too.

Parts of Chapter 3 were previously published as 'No Country for Old Men? Ciceronian Friendship and Old Age in Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy and Beyond', *Review of English Studies*, 62 (2011), 716–37. My epigraph is taken from Jo Shapcott's 'Procedure', the penultimate poem in *Of Mutability* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), and I am grateful to her for permission to use it here.

Note on Texts

All quotations from Shakespeare's plays and poems are taken from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). Where other editions have been consulted, they are cited in the notes. All titles and quotations from early modern texts (except those by Spenser) have been modernized.

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Introduction

Why Memory?

As the twenty-first century enters its second decade, we have never before had so many different means of recording and storing data: the scribbled post-it note and the online database, the mobile phone snapshot and the MRI scan, the mp3 file, the DNA sequence, and still, despite this ever-burgeoning technology of information, record, and retrieval, the diary, the letter, the sketch, the map, the memoir. Books about memory often start with a recital of these apparatuses of memory and claim that their own moment of composition represents some kind of watershed: thus studies from the late twentieth century draw on television and emerging models of digital memory, while earlier works pay more attention to cinema, photography, and phonography. Even as I name these new technologies, I am ruefully aware that they, too, will become the dated markers of a particular epoch before too long. (The iPhone mentioned later in this chapter was first a PalmPilot and then a BlackBerry.) But no matter what the technology, be it a cave wall or a Facebook wall, a wax tablet, an iPad, or simply an old-fashioned book, only we ourselves can remember, and the nature of memory, despite its increasing technological elaboration, remains ultimately mysterious. Without the human mind, all our mnemonic gadgetry is either crutch or metaphor; it cannot remember for us. At the same time, such devices change how we think about memory, what we think we are doing when we remember, as much as how we remember. The same was true for Shakespeare and the culture in which he lived.

As people live longer, we have also become increasingly aware that memory shifts and alters over time. Someone who cannot remember what they did last Tuesday or before lunch can instantly recall the minute details of their schooldays or their military service. In an age of ever-increasing individualism, the shared memory remains potent, but at its worst becomes a tinny nostalgia, preyed on by media and politicians alike: Mieke Bal, one of the most influential theorists of memory, describes such nostalgia as 'regressive, romanticizing, the temporal equivalent of tourism and the search for the picturesque . . . longing for an idyllic past that never was . . .'.[1] And shared memories too can be manipulated and falsified, into a collusive, comforting fantasy that borders on denial. We all know that images can be photoshopped, and who among us has not acquiesced in error to the suggestion that we 'save all changes', or deleted a vital email, or corrupted a file, or lost a mobile with all our numbers stored only there? Although we have become wise to the notions of recovered memories and false memories, we know that memory remains intimately connected to who we are: if private data and even 'identity' can be stolen by those who are prepared to hack phones and computers and hunt through rubbish bins for bank statements and phone bills, our memories may be all that we have left of who we are. Or were.

Memory studies as a field of academic interest originally developed out of Holocaust studies, perhaps driven by the simultaneous realization that time is running out (for we are the last generation for whom it will be possible to speak with survivors) and the recognition of the problems of records: false or lost papers, enormous archives, assumed identities. The invented Holocaust memoir has become a strange subgenre of its own. More historiographical issues are often inseparable from the ethical and psychological questions raised by the suppression, repression, or solicitation of the memories of trauma. When does memory become history? When does history become myth? Shakespeare is interested in these questions.

One of the most perceptive aspects of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series is its close attention to the power of memory. In earlier novels in the series, memory charms ('Obliviate!') are used to 'modify' the memory, removing any recollection of trauma, and the series' villain reappears as the memory of his teenage self; the ability to focus on a happy memory is crucial to the conjuring of the Patronus charm

against the Dementors, who torment their victims by making them relive the worst moments of their lives. Rowling invents the Pensieve, in which memories can be re-entered and safely re-explored, but she later shows that these too can be manipulated; it is via a compilation of memories, retrieved from a character at the point of death, that the hero Harry learns the truth about his intended fate at the climax of the final volume. This attention to the attraction of memory as phenomenon, and the possibility of exploring it in a society apparently without technology, is especially effective in a series that is so conscious of its debts to literary and cultural archetypes, and that has been accused of being unhealthily nostalgic for a world of boarding school and moral certainty. For an older audience, the television series *Mad Men* operates in a perpetual state of mnemonic *mise en abime*, obsessively reconstructing the advertising industry in 1960s New York at the same time as it shows that industry's burgeoning awareness of the power of nostalgia, even a false, coercive nostalgia, to shift products from slide projectors to ice cream; one early episode is even constructed around the assassination of President Kennedy, the 'where were you when' moment so beloved by many writers about memory.

Interest in memory is burgeoning, across a spectrum that ranges from the physiological and biochemical experiments of 'hard' neuroscience, through behavioural and cognitive psychology, child development, computer science, philosophy, and through the whole range of the humanities and social sciences. Knowing what might possibly be useful to a study such as this one is at times bewildering, and I have had to think carefully about how to incorporate apparently beguiling material from neuroscience, for example: I am not a scientist, and I do not want to misrepresent clinical or experimental material by oversimplifying or misapplying it. Literary critics are only slowly catching up to their scientific colleagues in realizing that MRI scans of brain activity in response to certain stimuli, for example, can usually be interpreted in many (often very general) ways. Here, I have drawn largely on mainstream 'popular' science writing, aimed at non-specialist readers, rather than plunging around blindly in the more esoteric fringes of experimental neuroscience and psychology, but have sought out recent work that is soundly underpinned in both the history of science and clinical and experimental practice.[2] I have

also drawn on the expertise of my scientific colleagues, who have both filled in some of my gaps and reassured me that my interpretations and applications of the science of memory in relation to Shakespeare's plays and poems 'make sense'.

Why Shakespeare?

In classical mythology, Mnemosyne, Memory, was the mother of the nine Muses, who inspired all forms of artistic expression, including drama, poetry, music, and history-writing; these have always been looked to both as ways to remember and as places to think about memory. I offered the examples of *Harry Potter* and *Mad Men* above partly in order to illustrate that both popular and elite culture (and Shakespeare's plays were both), as much as if not more than technology, are useful in thinking about memory in a particular historical and cultural moment, now, and at the end of the sixteenth century. And I would suggest that there *is* a kind of parallel between the end of the sixteenth century and the turn of the twenty-first, in terms of the prominence of ideas about memory, and also a sense of unease, if not crisis. Shakespeare did not have to worry about dropping his iPhone into the Thames, or, more seriously, that shadowy figures from the underworld of international terrorism would apply for a passport in the name of his dead son. But he was living at a time when memory was becoming fraught. Some of the reasons for this were doctrinal, as the Protestant Reformation solidified into new belief structures and social patterns that altered the ways in which people thought about the relationships between past, present, and future time—the ways in which they remembered—and how they conceived of their own places within these schemata. By 1600, it was a generation, generously interpreted, since the Elizabethan settlement, which established the formal characteristics and doctrinal parameters of Anglican worship in England. By 1600, therefore, no one under the age of 50 would have had anything but vague memories of life and religious practice in a Catholic country, at least in London and the south-east. In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Stephen Greenblatt called this 'the fifty-year effect' and linked it to nostalgia for the old ways, which had by this time become largely a folk memory, rather than a matter of recollected personal, lived experience. (Versions of this effect in other contexts are

discussed by many historians and sociologists.) Such a passage of time might, one assumes, lead to a greater harmony and stability, in both cultural and epistemological terms, over the remembering of the dead, but *Hamlet* is only one piece of evidence suggesting that this was very far from being the case. Greenblatt began his influential *Shakespearean Negotiations* with a potent statement of intent: 'I began with the desire to speak with the dead.' The 'social energies' that he lists in his introduction include 'power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, wonder, desire, anxiety, religious awe, free-floating intensities of experience'[3]—but not memory. It is surprising that memory does not appear in this list, and this book, investigating some of the various forms and phenomena of both personal and communal memory in relation to Shakespeare's plays and poems, will show why.

Some early modern insecurities about memory stemmed from those about the future. By 1600, Elizabeth herself was old, and most of her great courtiers—Leicester, Walsingham, Hatton, Burghley—had died, and the earl of Essex, her last and most troubled favourite, was falling, his idealization of chivalric virtue and ancient nobility out of place in the new political environment typified by the rise of Robert Cecil. England began the new century reigned over by an ageing queen who resolutely refused officially to name her successor. There was the sense of *fin de siècle*, the end of an era; uncertainty (or what Sonnet 107 calls 'incertainties') about what might happen next in political and dynastic terms could be at least partly interpreted as a surrogate for larger anxieties about what Hamlet calls 'the undiscovered country'. For Elizabeth I we might substitute Pope John Paul II, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, (or, if it is not treasonable to do so, her daughter): even an awareness of the inevitable imminence of the necessary end of an era can unsettle. Will coins and stamps suddenly look old-fashioned? Will last year all too swiftly become another 'age'? By the same token, the deaths of the famous, or other great catastrophes, have become disproportionately important as markers of memory since the age of the newsflash, and the personal memories of individuals become entangled with Kennedy's assassination, the *Challenger* disaster, the death of Princess Diana, or 9/11,[4] although they still retain the more personal milestones of birth and death, career and calendar. Perhaps some people in early