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# Shakespeare's Memorial Drama: History, Memory and the Re-rehearsing of Ideology on the Shakespearean Stage

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**O**bfuscation, indirection, ambiguity or indeed hybridity are words which spring to mind whenever one tries to identify the ideological veins running through Shakespeare's works. To these qualities I would add an extraordinary ability on the part of the playwright not only to stage some of the religious and political tensions of his time, but also to use the dramatic medium in a *timely* fashion. By timely, I mean that Shakespeare, like other dramatists who wrote ideologically charged plays (I am thinking of Marlowe, Chapman or Jonson), seemed to have an acute sense of the moment.

Little in the way of an “Elizabethan world picture” was available for the vast majority of Shakespeare's contemporaries, those in particular who did not have privileged access to large historiographical enterprises such as Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which sought to bring the threads of an ideologically multifarious nation together. Thus, Shakespeare, to some extent, wrote for “those that have not read the story”, as the Chorus in *Henry V* would have it (V.0.1).<sup>1</sup> Thomas Heywood, who owed much of his livelihood to the chronicles he pillaged to pro-

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare's works will be to *The Complete Works*, ed. Wells and Taylor.

duce his own works, wrote famously that “playes . . . taught the unlearned the knowledge of many famous histories, instructed such as cannot reade in the discovery of all our *English Chronicles*” (Heywood, sig. F3<sup>r</sup>).<sup>2</sup>

Yet the plays inspired by the work of historiographers were not simply trivial and popularized versions of a more serious type of discourse, nor were they didactic exercises. It seems rather that Shakespeare and some of his fellow dramatists were well aware that they had a crucial social role to play. Their drama might have been closely inspired by the work of chroniclers; it was, however, highly conscious of the difficult, or indeed sometimes impossible ideological mix which these chroniclers tried to produce. Shakespeare was writing at a time when history was beginning to be less local and more concerned with telling a national story. But, at the same time, that national story could only be told at some considerable expense. For English or British history to emerge, there were a number of stories produced by various communities which had to be, if not silenced, at least subdued. Because drama feeds partly on antagonism, conflict and debate, dramatists seized upon the contradictions of historical discourse. They aired opposed views, when historians tended to look more for continuity and coherence, and they often created alternative scenarios and interpretations by staging invented scenes.

Theatre is also fundamentally an art of remembrance, or, to use Marvin Carlson’s apt phrase, a “memory machine”, which recycles the past, transforms it, memorizes it, re-rehearses it, and lets audiences build connections to their past.<sup>3</sup> Drama is, I argue, particularly sensitive to the “battle of memories”, that is, to the competition between the different communal stories to impose their truth, their version of history above the others’. It seeks, likewise, to make its audiences conscious of the way memory is turned into history.

Shakespearean drama often plays on the memorial string to establish an almost emotional bond with its audiences. Possibly because he wrote plays over a period of more than twenty years, Shakespeare managed to create a truly impres-

2 See Wright, pp. 287–93.

3 See Marvin Carlson’s seminal book, *The Haunted Stage*, esp. pp. 1–5, 11, 13–14, 17. The links between the arts of memory and Renaissance theatre are beyond the scope of this essay. For an investigation of their relationship, see Frances A. Yates’s classic study, *The Art of Memory*. Other more recent works tackle the question of memory mainly from a thematic angle and do not explore Shakespearean memorial networks in any great detail; see Barish, Sullivan and Holland, ed. However, Holland’s essay (“On the Gravy Train”) in this last collection adopts a perspective which is not far from mine.

sive network of memorial elements which not only allowed his audiences to connect to his work, but also enabled individuals to reawaken their memories both as spectators of Shakespeare's plays and as human beings caught up in time. For Shakespeare, memory is a powerful ideological and cultural matrix, a protean entity, which enables individuals to build a frail but crucial relationship with a past which is gone but survives in so many stories, objects, or places.<sup>4</sup> However, memory can be tyrannical also. It can seek to govern history entirely and to abolish time, particularly when it is used by characters for whom memory is an instrument of domination, a way, as we shall see, of imposing a selective memory on a nation which they wish to maintain in an eternal commemorative present.

In *Hamlet*, one senses that remembrance can become a burden for the living, but also how much memory is intimately tied to the theatrical medium—theatre being the locus of memory. Shakespeare's wordplay is particularly effective when Hamlet uses "globe" to refer to his mind, in which the memory of his late father will remain ("while memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe" [I.v.96-97]). For the audience, of course, "globe" also alludes to the Globe theatre, where the play was probably performed. Thus, the pun leads us to reflect on the power of theatre to conjure up the remembrance of things past. Allusions to the Globe Theatre are fairly frequent in Shakespeare<sup>5</sup>—they are always a way of creating a powerful link between the audience's remembrance of the play and the place where it was staged. Not only do these allusions point to drama's ability to produce memory, but they also show how theatre is a place where a reflection on the social and cultural role of memory can be initiated.

There are times also when Shakespeare himself elaborates a subtle memorial mix to lend greater social and political relevance to his theatre. In the Chorus to Act V of *Henry V*, for instance, he blends memories of ancient history with the story of the medieval king and with allusions to more recent political events. Indeed, the history of Henry V is haunted for a moment by Julius Caesar's ancient Rome and by events which many no doubt had in mind when they watched the play—the departure of an army for Ireland to curb a rebellion. The play superimposes these perspectives and uses an ancient example (the return in triumph of Caesar) to suggest the repetition of this example in the medieval past, even while

4 On these issues, see Ricœur, p. 106 *et passim*. I am much indebted to Ricœur's work throughout this essay.

5 See, for instance, *Tro.*, I.iii.113; *Oth.*, V.ii.109; *Tmp.*, IV.i.153.

anticipating its repetition in the near future. Through the association of different political figures—Julius Caesar, Henry V and probably Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex (“the General of our gracious Empress”)—Shakespeare manages to give the illusion that his theatre can have an effect on political reality:

But now behold  
In the quick forge and working-house of thought,  
How London doth pour out her citizens.  
The Mayor and all his brethren, in best sort,  
Like to the senators of th’antique Rome  
With the plebeians swarming at their heels,  
Go forth and fetch their conqu’ring Caesar in—  
As, by a lower but high-loving likelihood,  
Were now the General of our gracious Empress—  
As in good time he may—from Ireland coming,  
Bringing rebellion broachèd on his sword,  
How many would the peaceful city quit  
To welcome him! Much more, and much more cause,  
Did they this Harry. (V.0.22-35)

The effect sought by the Chorus was heavily dependent on its audience’s memory and imagination—the reception of this passage no doubt varied from one person to the next.<sup>6</sup> Be that as it may, the Chorus’s manipulation of memorial elements could certainly act as a reminder of how an audience’s sense of the present, and also its sense of future events, are relentlessly informed by the return of memorial elements which are constantly recycled and reinterpreted.

Theatre continuously seeks to perfect its representation of past stories, which are re-rehearsed and replayed endlessly in a present that modifies them, but which they also help to transform. In its workings, drama comes to mimic the fate of memorial elements, which are likewise recycled and reappropriated. After Caesar’s murder in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Cassius explicitly describes this process of endless rehearsing of the same historical event:

Stoop, then, and wash.  
*They smear their hands with Caesar’s blood*  
How many ages hence  
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,  
In states unborn and accents yet unknown! (III.i.112-14)

6 The Chorus’s expectations were to prove very wrong—the Earl of Essex returned from Ireland in disgrace in late September 1599.

The memory of the historical murder acquires a terrifying dimension when it is conceived as something that will be “acted over”, re-rehearsed. While Caesar’s death may have been inglorious (“no worthier than the dust”), the repeated staging of his murder by actors will make that event enter the world of symbolic representation:

*Brutus.* How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,  
That now on Pompey’s basis lies along,  
No worthier than the dust! (III.i.115-17)

As soon as the recycling begins, the murder enters the world of representation and the “battle of memories”—the struggle between different interpretations of the same event—can begin. What may happen too is that representation itself can be hijacked and made to serve specific ideological agendas. This is clear in Cassius’s manipulative and biased answer to Brutus’s genuine fear of representation:

*Cassius.* So oft as that shall be,  
So often shall the knot of us be called  
The men who gave their country liberty. (III.i.117-19)

Memorial stories made up and imposed by victors can be cruel, and they can certainly distort events. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the defeated queen of Egypt worries about how she will be staged by Roman actors. Nonetheless, her words betray another anxiety which Shakespeare’s theatre tries to defuse through humour. Indeed, the “squeaking” boy actor of Elizabethan theatre may not be worthy of what he seeks to represent:

The quick comedians  
Extemporally will stage us, and present  
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony  
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see  
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness  
I’th’posture of a whore. (V.ii.212-17)

Shakespeare draws his spectators’ attention here to the fact that memory can always be ideologically distorted, but also signals that there is an incompleteness at the heart of representation. To some extent, representation and memory have similar drawbacks—both are plagued by gaps or imprecision, and they can both be made to serve specific ideological agendas.

The similarity between memorial elements and theatrical representation is something Shakespeare seems to have had in mind when writing. Critics often overlook the fact that the dramatist played repeatedly on audience's memories of past performances of his plays. These traces of older performances are a testimony to his relentless reinterpretation both of history *and* of his own plays. By awakening his spectators' remembrance of his plays, Shakespeare would inevitably draw their attention to the often disconcerting but always fertile return of the past in the present—a past which comes back transformed and with a capacity to alter the present. Shakespeare may also have used these cross-references to tie the different parts of his creation together and build an *œuvre*. But what is more certain is that the Shakespearean “memory machine” helped his audiences establish an intimate relationship to his works, as well as a personal connection to the memorial elements on which these works relied.

Hence, it is not purely by chance that in the first scene of *Hamlet* (1600–1601), Horatio brings back to the spectators' minds the memory of *Julius Caesar* (1599) by alluding to the events which led in the latter play to the murder of the archetypal father of the nation. Horatio manages to create a particular climate in this scene by referring to the series of ill omens which had preceded the assassination of Caesar: “In the most high and palmy state of Rome / A little ere the mightiest Julius fell . . .” (I.i.112–13).<sup>7</sup> Later on, the associations between the two plays become even more precise, especially for those who had actually seen Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* on stage. Indeed, the following dialogue between Polonius and Hamlet was even more significant for the members of the Elizabethan audience who remembered which actors had played the parts of Caesar and Brutus in 1599:

*Polonius.* I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th' Capitol. Brutus killed me.

*Hamlet.* It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there.—Be the players ready?

(III ii.99–102)

It is highly probable that the actor playing Polonius (John Heminges) had played Julius Caesar a year or two before, whereas Richard Burbage (who no doubt played Hamlet in this scene) had acted the part of Brutus.<sup>8</sup> Through these memorial associations, Shakespeare awakes in this scene of *Hamlet* the ghosts of Caesar and Brutus, two figures who could remind audiences of the sacrificial

7 This passage is not in Q1 or in F1. The edition cited here is *Hamlet*, ed. Thompson and Taylor.

8 See Thompson and Taylor, eds, p. 304, n. to III.ii.99–102.



murder of the father of the nation on the Capitoline hill (*cf.* “to kill so capital a calf there”),<sup>9</sup> an act which is about to repeat itself in the play. But of course this act repeats itself differently (Hamlet kills Polonius by mistake, thinking he is killing his step-father). History never repeats itself exactly; it is only our imaginary perception of facts and the symbolic value we lend to them which give us the impression of an eternal return of history. This is one truth that drama, which relies so much on repetition and recycling, never ceases to provide.

The ghost of Caesar haunts other plays also. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Pompey alludes to Caesar’s spectral presence in his evocation of the political past (“Julius Caesar, / Who at Philippi the good Brutus ghosted” [II.vi.12-13]), and Marc Antony uses words close to Julius Caesar’s when describing Cassius: “The lean and wrinkled Cassius” (III.xi.37).<sup>10</sup>

In *Cymbeline* (1610), the Roman Caius Lucius comes to England to tell its king that the country has failed to pay its debt (financial, but also symbolic) to Rome. What better way of reminding the country of its debt than to evoke the memory of Julius Caesar, whose image lives on, according to Lucius. It is true that the Elizabethan theatre was still haunted by him:

*Lucius.* When Julius Caesar—whose remembrance yet  
Lives in men’s eyes, and will to ears and tongues  
Be theme and hearing ever—was in this Britain . . . (III.i.2-4)

However, Lucius’s reminder brings another association from the past to the fore, namely Augustus Caesar (Octavian in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*). Indeed, Lucius is an emissary sent by Augustus Caesar, who himself was Caesar’s great-nephew and adopted son. Augustus’s reign was relatively stable politically and has been long known as the age of the *pax romana*. Interestingly, the semi-legendary king Cymbeline concludes a peace treaty with Augustus at the end of the play and agrees to pay England’s debt to Rome. Cymbeline’s peacemaking may have reminded some Jacobean spectators of the political aspirations of their own sovereign—James I—who liked to be known as *Jacobus Pacificus*. Moreover, in the second half of the play, the importance given to Milford Haven, a port in the south-west of Wales, might have called distantly to mind the arrival of

9 Historically, Caesar was assassinated in the Senate, which is just below the Capitoline hill. Shakespeare (or Polonius) is confused here.

10 This is an echo of “Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look” (*JC*, I.ii.195).

another unifier, Shakespeare's Earl of Richmond in the play *Richard III*,<sup>11</sup> that is to say, the future Tudor king Henry VII, from whom James I's two parents descended directly. There is in *Cymbeline* a certain memorial logic which seems to lead characters naturally towards this symbolic port, which the play revisits. To quote *Cymbeline*'s daughter, Innogen, "There's no more to say: / Accessible is none but Milford way" (III.ii.81-82). Innogen also widens the protectionist perspective adopted by *Cymbeline*'s queen and in so doing develops ideas which were undoubtedly dear to James I. Great Britain (no longer England) should not, according to Innogen, fear to seek alliances well beyond its boundaries: "T' th' world's volume / Our Britain seems as of it but not in't, / In a great pool a swan's nest. Prithee think / There's livers out of Britain" (III.iv.138-41).

This blend of memorial and of topical allusions is produced by a series of minor details and never quite adds up to a fully-fledged political allegory. Shakespeare may have been a prominent member of the King's Men, but there were still limits to how much he could push the political allegory in a play where, after all, *Cymbeline*'s immediate entourage (the Queen and her son Cloten) were cast in a negative light. There is reason to believe also that, even if Shakespeare flirted at times with political allegory, he and his company were more interested in exploring the subtle links between ideology and memorial reconstructions of the past.

Even in such a seemingly nationalistic play as *Henry V* (1599), there are a number of elements which show clearly that Shakespeare was well aware that memory could go astray and become burdensome. This was especially the case when memorial stories were made to serve political ends and were thus imposed on the nation. As Paul Ricœur writes in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, in these cases "un pacte redoutable se noue ainsi entre remémoration, mémorisation et commémoration" (p. 104).<sup>12</sup> There is perhaps no better example of the way memory can be manipulated than Henry V's speech to his troops at the battle of Agincourt on St. Crispin's day:

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,  
But he'll remember, with advantages,

- 11 Shakespeare may still have had his *Richard III* in mind when he wrote (almost twenty years later) the part of Buckingham for *Henry VIII*. Buckingham in *Henry VIII* remembers his father's fatal destiny and regrets that history should repeat itself: "thus far we are one in fortunes" (*H8*, II.i.122).
- 12 "a terrifying deal is struck between remembrance, memorizing and commemoration" (my translation).

What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,  
 Familiar in his mouth as household words—  
 Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter,  
 Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester—  
 Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered.  
 This story shall the good man teach his son,  
 And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by  
 From this day to the ending of the world  
 But we in it shall be rememberèd,  
 We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.  
 For he today that sheds his blood with me  
 Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile . . . (IV.iii.49-62)

This speech makes the feeling of belonging to a community and to an almost egalitarian brotherhood (“For he today that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother”) conditional on the repetition of a story which will be part and parcel of a future commemoration. Projecting himself into the future and even beyond (“to the ending of the world”), Henry builds his communal project well in advance. He anticipates the repeated remembrance of the feats accomplished on St. Crispin’s Day in order to make that moment part of an eternal commemorative present. His speech almost manages to dispense with history and force Elizabethan audiences to commemorate the victory through the agency of drama. Indeed, drama both maintains and repeats the remembrance of these events for the benefit of the community of spectators. The magic seems to work wonderfully—and yet there is a hitch: Elizabethan audiences knew full well that the victory of Agincourt was no longer celebrated on St. Crispin’s Day. Thus, Henry’s promise turns out to be false in the end, and those among the audience who had Catholic leanings would no doubt be able to spot the tricks Henry had been up to, as well as their latent irony: it is obvious that Henry appropriates a religious feast, in the same way that the Elizabethan government had appropriated the feast of St. Hugh of Lincoln and turned it into a national day of celebration (the queen’s Accession Day).<sup>13</sup> The appropriation meant that another memorial story had to be silenced—the story of Crispin and Crispianus, two brothers who had fled Rome to evangelize the French. These two Catholic martyrs had become the patron saints of cobblers and had converted the poor to the

13 On this subject, see Jonathan Baldo’s important essay, “Wars of Memory in *Henry V*”, esp. p. 155. This section of my article is partly indebted to Baldo’s analyses.

Christian faith by providing them with shoes.<sup>14</sup> One is of course immediately struck by the implicit irony of the appropriation—Henry’s English troops were hardly there to evangelize the French!

Even if relatively few spectators could perceive the ironical return of an otherwise silenced memorial story, many knew why the battle of Agincourt was no longer celebrated in Elizabethan England. The English had to forget whatever reminded them of the bitter loss of their last French territory—the town of Calais—the year before Elizabeth I’s rise to the throne.<sup>15</sup> So the commemoration which Henry had in mind could not quite work. The endless repetition of the memorial event is stalled by the theatre’s will not to condone the manipulation. An imposed memory can certainly not pass as history. Indeed, it is particularly telling that Shakespeare ends his play with a *historical* reminder:

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned king  
Of France and England, did this king succeed,  
Whose state so many had the managing  
That they lost France and made his England bleed,  
Which oft our stage hath shown—and, for their sake,  
In your fair minds let this acceptance take. (Epi. 9-14)

Whereas Henry imagined that his imposed memorial story would be repeated to the point of making history, Shakespearean drama reminded its audiences time and time again (“Which oft our stage hath shown”) that such fabricated memory was in no way prophetic. But the supreme irony of this conclusion is that *past* performances inform the future of *Henry V*. Shakespearean drama’s “memory machine” operates fully here by discarding ideology in the end and letting the theatrical and historic past come back to challenge the present.

14 See Duchet-Suchaux and Pastoureau, p. 96.

15 On the ironic return of French otherness in Renaissance theatre, see Hillman, *passim*.

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