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Shakespeare et la mémoire

Foreword

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Foreword

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Shakespeare and memory

- 1 Shakespeare and his contemporaries invent new styles, interpretations or imaginary models by tapping the most ancient sources of collective memory, those most frequently imitated, in literature, history, legend, mythology, iconography... Simultaneously, an unprecedented crisis in learning and representations questions the validity of creative methods based on such acquired knowledge, saturated with references to the past Europe was built on, thus shaking its constitutive cult and culture of memory. Montaigne, although he had no objection himself to repeating and borrowing, denounced its oppressive weight: “There’s more ado to interpret interpretations than to interpret things, and more books upon books than upon any other subject. We do but enter-glose our selves. All swarms with commentaries; of Authors there is great penury. Is not the chiefest and most famous knowledge of our ages to know how to understand the wise?”
- 2 In their age of paradoxes, Giordano Bruno, a philosopher who gave much thought to the technical workings of *Artes memoriae*, chose to break with the stifled memory of “the wise”, heirs and commentators of Aristotle, in favour of a liberating logic, and invent an infinite universe of many worlds. His provocative style challenged all literary inheritance with satires of conventional rhetoric, a good indication that memory itself stood at the centre of the crisis. With the advent of printing, the *Artes memoriae* that used to store and safeguard knowledge had lost much of their urgency, perhaps their relevance. Memory was now required in the service of new acquisitions, casting doubt on the very notion of inheritance – a crisis affecting the values of humanism, religious unity, political governments around Europe, moving away from the clerical basis of learning, having tapped dry and subverted heavy predecessors like the inescapable Petrarch.

- 3 In the manner of Janus, an Elizabethan icon, memory then looks at the past to decipher an undecided, unreadable future, perhaps invent a new memory or new history: the tale of Troy's woes will provide a founding legend, and a fake heroic memory, to all the nations of Europe. New rules of writing and dramaturgy will be drawn from Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars poetica* in numerous essays and treatises. Ovid's more archaic myth of Acteon will add to the *voluptas dolendi* inherited from Petrarch, the better to express the pleasurable discontent of mannerist waverings, an epitome of the poet's delight in subverting and corrupting the most revered literary models. Plutarch supplies material for a baroque rewriting of Antony and Cleopatra's tragic love, spiced up with a touch of Horace's reluctant admiration for the "frenzied Queen". The more recent Plantagenet saga suggests keys to the still unresolved threat of an open succession. Machiavelli combines the lessons of Livy and Tacitus with what he has learnt at various Italian courts to evolve a thoroughly modern theory of power that will serve as basis to portrayals of "politic", i.e. Machiavellian, monarchs in reconstructions like Shakespeare's Henry IV: the kind of usurping but efficient ruler Essex might turn into if he did succeed in his bid for Elizabeth's throne. Memory also invites itself as an obsessive fear, the voice of a guilty conscience that haunts the stage of *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* in ghostly shape.
- 4 Translations from the Latin, Greek, Italian and French arrive upon cue to freshen up the faded, blurred memories of influential texts, imbuing them with new dynamics: "the world is a theatre" to Epictetus, whose *Manual* is translated in 1567, long before his metaphor becomes a free for all cliché on the Elizabethan stage, in the service of wholly different ends. The discovery of paintings in Nero's buried *Domus Aurea* fires imaginings of the "grotesche" whose discontinuities will lead Montaigne to call them an emblem of his own writing. Translations of the Bible appear central to the Reformation programme, suffused with a will to "re-memorize" this founding text under different lights. Myths of pre-lapsarian times, edens and other golden ages of humanity are endlessly revisited, to stress either the "fall into time" caused by Adam's "sin", or the violent birth of history in a new "iron age", in which memory is torn between idealizations of the past, distrust of the present, anxiety and even terror of the future.
- 5 The fields to explore are vast and many: the workings of memory and its cult in Shakespeare's days; the woven memory of old texts into any new one, of another's text into one's own; the memory of self born from rehearsed Petrarchan laments, or the Psalmist's descant on David's doleful "I"; the study of innovative links between memory and history, memory and knowledge, science, religion, writing, memory of self and autobiography in the first tales of conversions, memory and the history of memory itself; the geography of memory through the use of *loci*, i.e. the imaginary location of memorised objects; or early medical enquiries into the exact location of memory in the brain...
- 6 No doubt other areas of research will spring to mind, for instance the remembrance of Shakespeare by his contemporaries, like the admiring yet unquiet tribute to his work by Jonson, for whom the thought that it rests on "little Latine and lesse Greeke" is as good, or as bad, to him, as no memory to speak of. On the other hand our own contemporaries might well need, to paraphrase Charles Mauron's psychocriticism, to track an "obsessive metaphor" in themselves: has Shakespeare's absolute conquest of global memory reached the heights of a "personal myth" where he stands immune from any interpretative criteria according to conservative anglophone criticism? Or

has he so penetrated the imagination of English-speaking writers that a number of them depend on him to illuminate their own “personal myths”?

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“What I retain from them”

- 8 Technological progress has given us a polyurethane compound called “memory foam”, which makes it possible to create objects capable of returning to their original shape, once the pressure is removed, thus presenting no trace of their manipulation, as though they could withstand the test of time. The performances of this new memory foam depend on its intrinsic feature to recover its shape as fast as possible. Consequently, current research aims at increasing its “response time” and its “fast recovery”. For centuries, treatises dealing with *ars memoriae* have fostered the illusion that memory was a malleable entity which could be stretched out in order to become more efficient. They advocated a regular practice of memorization and the sorting of memories in a hierarchic, even geographical, sequencing with the help of *loci*. Therefore, the rapid recovery of memories was considered to be a mere intellectual exercise and proved necessary for any orator who wished to structure and enrich his rhetorical art.
- 9 However, memory, being a complex process requiring both reality and imagination, remains fallible. The memory of an event can easily be deformed through the memorial prism, since it is diffracted in multiple and, most of the time, unfaithful interpretations. And when the memory of the past is not kept alive, it progressively erodes and disappears into oblivion. It is always fluctuating and needs to be frequently recovered and confronted with great discoveries, new mores and the *épistémè* of its time.
- 10 On a national level, it seems of the utmost importance, during particular periods, to revive the collective memory in order to forge national identity and to punctuate the past with time markers, such as high deeds and military victories, great historical figures and places of remembrance. Great feats have always served as memorial standards. The fact of “hoarding” them in memory asserts the current greatness of a people, as though it had been stamped with a seal inherited from the past, and it also limits the scope of memory to a few permanent historical dates. This sorting of memory entails an ideological orientation. A memory is easily agreed upon, as long as it has been cleansed of guilt and embellished by ancestral courage and virtue. Memory is a national issue. But who can claim to be its custodians? Monarchs, historians or artists, who present it in their works?
- 11 At the beginning of this collection, Henri Suhamy invites us to consider Shakespeare’s works as an ode to memory, “remembrance of things past” (Sonnet 30). Memory is a fundamental dramatic feature, providing, on the one hand, a historical background for the current action, with the help of retrospective speeches, and, on the other hand, a legitimate explanation for the behaviour of characters, who are haunted by remorse and regret for their past deeds. It is revived in the staging of commemorative ceremonies and it is perpetuated through the obligation to remember and the sense of honour, a moral and hereditary valour, passed on from one generation to the next, thus establishing a genealogy of exemplarity.

- 12 In their history plays, Elizabethan playwrights have created a condensed and simplified version of English history, establishing a filiation between the English and the heroes of the country's historical or mythical past. They provided historical facts with a new contextualisation by staging them during a period of uncertainty concerning the future. Andrew Hiscock offers a new perspective on Shakespeare's two historical tetralogies by demonstrating the strategic appropriation of memory by the monarchy: it forges a collective destiny and reinforces the nation's identity, but, in return, the abusive use of the past presents a risk of political inertia. On a similar theme, Gilles Bertheau offers us a reflexion on historical memory in George Chapman's *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Byron* considering the fight between Henry and Byron as a way of imposing their respective versions of memory and acquiring a monopoly on it so that they can bequeath their personal posterity according to their will.
- 13 The construction of historical memory often requires the unearthing of epic tales and myths. Atsuhiko Hirota shows us how Hesione's recollection of the destruction of Troy by Hercules, has voluntarily been ignored by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*. Christine Sukič examines Fulke Greville's *A Dedication to Sir Philip Sidney*, a nostalgic text praising the poet's heroism, which reverses the imitative model of representation by disregarding the question of the body's beauty. For Christophe Hausermann, Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI* and Richard Johnson's chivalric romances share the same desire for historical and cultural transmission through the memory of high deeds, which are markers of time used as mnemonics in order to remember the names of lesser historical figures.
- 14 In their plays, playwrights often question the sources of their drama. In Elizabethan times, collaborations and literary borrowings were common. Roger Chartier analyses *Cardenio*, a lost play whose title signals it had been inspired by an episode from *Don Quichotte*, and he questions the creative process of Elizabethan playwrights and the canonicity of their works. Tatiana Burtin finds in *The Merchant of Venice* a new representation for avarice, opposed to the models offered by Antiquity and the Moralities, leading to a new definition for comedy. Peter Happé points out the contrast between memory and forgetfulness in Ben Jonson's late plays, at a time when the author himself was suffering from memory loss. David Tuailon explains why Edward Bond has kept undying memories of a performance of *Macbeth* he witnessed when he was a teenager and how this memory has played a determining role in the creation of his own plays.
- 15 The art of memory consists in perpetuating the remembrance of words and in finding the infallible means to summon them at will. To that end, Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin shows us how the insult which has been hurled at Cloten in *Cymbeline*, "His meanest garment", permanently tarnishes his reputation, and she explains that words leave indelible traces and that resentment is always associated with memory. William E. Engel finds in *The Winter's Tale* the influence of mnemonics used in early modern times, while Claire Guéron uncovers such memorization techniques in *Julius Caesar*, a play revolving around oblivion and the unreliability of memories, which immerses the spectator in a state of confusion and asserts the primacy of theatrical performance over any strategies of empirical memorization.
- 16 While plays and poems recall their authors to memory, places of remembrance commemorate their greatness and permanently testify to their lasting influence. They are erected as bulwarks against oblivion and nothingness. Clara Calvo and David Pearce

guide us through such “lieux de mémoire”: *Poets’ Corner* in Westminster Abbey, Southwark Cathedral and The Rose Theatre.

- 17 These papers are followed by an interview with Krzysztof Warlikowski, who shares his experience as stage director and explains the constant back-and-forth movement between past and present, between his staging of *Contes africains* and its sources in Shakespeare’s plays. Finally, this collection proposes the literary creations of two prominent OuLiPians, Michèle Audin and Jacques Jouet, which were read before public on 24th March 2012 during the Société Française Shakespeare symposium.¹ They twist and play with the French language with stylistic exercises (lipogram, univocalism, “beau present” and other OuLiPian constraints). Thus, they shed new light on the characters of Shakespeare’s plays and poems and jostle our own memory.
- 18 Memory, according to Montaigne, is based on the self-appropriation of others’ thoughts: “What I retain from [books] is something that I no longer recognize as another’s. All the profit that my mind has made has been from the arguments and ideas that it has imbibed from them. The author, the place, the words, and other facts, I immediately forget.”² Therefore, I invite you to read these rich and varied texts and to remember all that you see fit to.
- 19 CHRISTOPHE HAUSERMANN

NOTES

1. The recording of these public readings are available online on the Société Française Shakespeare website.
2. Montaigne, “On Presumption”, *Essays*, trans. John M. Cohen, London, Penguin Books, 1958, reprinted 1993, p. 212.