Introduction: conjunctures and concepts

> A division occurred, between writing and action, which has become more apparent in each successive phase of this culture. One of the sources of this division was print: the attachment of writing to this static form, away from the human voices and movements to which it stood in a merely abstract relation. Another source, of a deeper kind, was a revaluation of action within the society. Certain 'representative' modes of dramatic writing seem to have developed, hand in hand, with certain 'representative' institutions for political actions and decision. Near their most serious interests, most men learned to give up the idea of intervention, participation, direct action, even as a possibility, in favour of indirect, conventional and reacting forms.
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> Raymond Williams, "Argument: Text and Performance," *Drama in Performance* (1968), p. 185

This study seeks to revisit relations of writing and performance in the Elizabethan theatre at a time when in our own cultural and critical discourses the authority of the printed text is undergoing far-reaching reassessments. While both the institution of authorship and the stability of the text have become controversial issues, 'performance' and 'performativity' are dominating critical discussion almost, as one provocative critic believes, "to the point of stupefaction" (Diamond, *Performance*, Introduction 2). 'Performance' has advanced to something like an ubiquitous concept which we use either to sound, or intercept our discontent with, the epistemology of representation. But even though 'performance' and the 'performative' have come close to constituting a new paradigm bridging several disciplines, the study of theatrical performance has, somehow, remained in the doldrums.

As Richard Schechner declared in a *Tulane Drama Review* editorial (1992): "The new paradigm is 'performance,' not theatre" (Schechner, "New Paradigm" 7). Philip Auslander, in his acutely informed recent study, *From Acting to Performance*, notes in reference to the work of distinguished contemporary theatre directors, performance artists and theoreticians, "that what they call 'performance' can be seen as deconstructing 'theatre.' They suggest that performance exists in an antagonistic

relationship with theatre," obstructing "theatre's essential features" (Auslander 54). In Europe as well as in America, there is by now a fairly wide-spread desire, on the part of avant-garde practitioners and theorists of performance, for "the emancipation from any necessary relationship with a 'text'" (Hilton, *New Directions* 6). In these circumstances, as a highly perceptive observer notes, drama in the theatre tends to be viewed as "an increasingly residual mode of performance," one that is bypassed in what is assumed to be the culturally and politically far more exciting search for "nondramatic, nontheatrical, nonscripted, ceremonial and everyday-life performance" (Worthen, "Drama" 1093–94). Small wonder, then, that "the burgeoning of performance studies has not really clarified the relation between dramatic text and performance" (1094).

To a good many readers, the current upheaval in the relationship of dramatic text and performance may perhaps appear to be quite remote from any of the major issues in today's Shakespeare criticism and production. But my point in calling attention to these revaluations is that, sooner or later, they will have a growing impact on the horizon of expectation against which Shakespeare's plays are produced, received, and critically re-examined in the twenty-first century. To say this is not necessarily a defensive or, for that matter, an opportunistic gesture. Rather, there is overwhelming evidence in the history of Shakespeare's reception that his cultural preeminence was closely linked, even in direct proportion, to what was most vitally alive, most absorbing, searching, or disturbing in the minds of his readers and spectators. This phenomenon is different from, and must not be reduced to, the time-serving assimilation of the bard to the latest fashion. What for Shakespeare critics, scholars, and theatre practitioners is perfectly legitimate, and in fact, a desideratum of some magnitude is to be wide awake to what is happening in our own contemporary theatre and culture.

The current trend in the non-academic reception of Shakespeare is a case in point. Today Shakespeare critics confront a cultural environment in which performance – including the highly varied forms of its technological reproduction – has overtaken text as the preferred medium of access to cultural experience and expression. For a significant, and significantly increasing, majority of people the encounter with Shakespeare is not through reading what he wrote but through watching certain electronically processed images of filmed performances. To acknowledge this major shift in the reception of the classic is to take cognizance not simply of deep-going changes in the media of access; no less important, the shifting mode of reception significantly affects the meaning of what is received. The parameters of what now authorizes and energizes the uses of his plays are themselves in flux. What we see emerging before our eyes is a new poetics

of cultural response that has its own demands and gratifications different from those of a predominantly textual assimilation of the classic.

This new poetics of cultural response, while it has reached academia only marginally, points to untapped sources of reproducible pleasure and profit in recycling the culture of the past – effects largely unanticipated in Walter Benjamin's celebrated essay. In this process, the authority of Shakespeare's writings recedes behind the authority (or is it, bluntly, accessibility) of what images of performance the electronically reproduced version of the text can be made to yield. In "the wake of the present displacements of book and literary culture," a major trend is to invoke "the high status literary text only to dismiss it in favor of the actor's performance" (Boose and Burt, *Shakespeare, the Movie* 10). This state of affairs once again enhances what Michael Bristol in *Big-time Shakespeare* has called the "chronic tension between a more exclusive culture of the book and a more popular culture of performance" (x; cf. 30).

In the Elizabethan theatre, as I shall suggest, this recurring tension constituted a source of strength through concomitant theatrical practices marked by doubleness and contrariety. This alone should make us wary of any rash disparagement of either of these communicative modes and their socio-economic hinterland. In studying Elizabethan uses of word and show in their mediated mode of interaction, it is both unwise and unhelpful, I believe, to deplore these shifts in the channels of access to cultural goods and services. But in our time the shift in media access, even when it enables many more people to assimilate easily reproducible versions of Shakespeare performed, is different from Elizabethan practices both in its effect and direction. The contemporary cultural drift from word to image, from text to show, from production to reproduction, counterpoints the Elizabethan moment of differentiation *and* inclusion between them; this drift raises questions that, from the point of view of Shakespeare criticism and scholarship, are troublesome rather than simply encouraging. In Raymond Williams' phrase, "the attachment of writing" to the static form of print was a move away from "human voices and movements." But can the attachment of Shakespeare's work to the screen, whether video, TV, or cinema, in any way hope to implicate people's "most serious interests" more effectively? Rather, the (by no means unambiguous) evidence more often than not suggests that the appropriation of Shakespeare's playtext by these media (and their political economy) is in its turn bringing forth "representative modes" of reception that are even more remote from cultural "intervention, participation, direct action."

Here, I must content myself with these bare notes on the changing horizons of Shakespeare's contemporary reception. The suggestion is that the best way for Shakespeare criticism to view in perspective today's

rapidly changing parameters in the reception of the classic is first of all to re-examine relations of language and show in their historical context, which is the Elizabethan theatre. If, as I shall suggest, these relations participate in the circulation of unfixed, largely untried and unsettled sources of appeal, the use and impact of a largely underestimated "scaenical authority" (Dekker's term) deserves to be considered more closely. Was the Elizabethan purpose of playing, perhaps, predicated upon far more fluid, direct, and less "representative" premises than mainstream twentieth-century criticism ever allowed for? For an answer, the present study seeks to explore the 'contrarious' element in the conditions and locations upon which a vulnerable alliance of early modern playing and writing unfolded. The element of contrariety was incompatible with, in fact it was the undoing of, the dominant Renaissance poetics of literacy. But once this element was absorbed by and adapted to the writing itself, it in its own turn helped for a certain time to keep viable more than one purpose of playing. In this context, "bifold authority" drew upon and reinvigorated a peculiar double-bind in Shakespeare's dramaturgy, even when the appeal of this doubleness was inseparable from the overall vulnerability and contingency of the cultural institution itself.

The precariously relative balance of word and action on the Elizabethan stage is probably unique. This is one more reason why this book rejects the notion of any analogy between early modern and late modern shifts in the accessibility and authorization of communicative media. Analogies between then and now carry perils; the facile establishment of similitude invites at best self-projection, at worst self-congratulation. It is an entirely different matter, however, to grapple with what elsewhere I have called the ineluctable conjuncture of "past significance and present meaning."[1] The idea is not simply to read and revitalize Shakespeare through our own haunting concerns, or use our sense of contemporaneity as a probe into previously underestimated or obliterated uses of his plays; rather, there is a simultaneous and equally urgent need to disclose the liabilities and uncertainties in our own cultural condition by exposing them to standards marked by the difference between what was possible then and what is (im)possible now.

In a project like this, my own limited critical awareness of, and unlimited indebtedness to, contemporary thought and scholarship should readily be indicated. As every student knows, in today's Shakespeare studies great attention is being paid to the staging of his plays in performance. For that alone, we all owe a heavy debt to those who broke the path, colleagues like Bernard Beckerman, Michael Goldman, and J. L. Styan, to name only these. But 'performance' in Shakespeare criticism by and large is viewed either as performance *of* the plays or as performance inscribed *in* dramatic

speech – never or rarely as a formative force, as an institutionalized power in itself, as a cultural practice in its own right. No doubt there is good reason for the reluctance, among Shakespeare scholars and critics, to dissociate – if only momentarily – the act of performance from what verbal meaning it seeks to convey. For centuries, the involvement of the poet with the theatre was taken to be at best a necessary concession to a circumstantial world marked by an extreme degree of contingency, the very opposite of poetry's presumed autonomy. But even in our own day, when the Elizabethan theatre has come respectfully to be considered as a catalyst of Shakespeare's greatest achievement as a poet, it appears exceedingly difficult, in reference to his stage, to use 'perform' intransitively, that is, without an object, the writer's text. Although in our own world 'performance' is being practiced and studied in ways that do not necessarily presuppose a verbal text, let alone a pre-scribed meaning,[2] when it comes to Shakespeare, most of us have difficulty believing that, in the Elizabethan theatre, "performance was not seen to be sustained by its text, nor by a uniform relation to its author" (Worthen, *Shakespeare* 28).[3]

There is, then, a great need to reconsider relations of writing and playing in their early modern context and to attempt to answer the question of how and to what extent performance in Shakespeare's theatre actually *was* a formative element, a constituent force, and together with, or even without, the text a source of material and "imaginary puissance." Even to formulate this question seems difficult today without taking into account certain deep-going yet somehow inconclusive shifts of emphasis in current studies of literacy and orality. At a time when a new generation of literacy studies with a strong sense of historicity, context, and theory has come to the fore, a highly critical perspective has developed *vis-à-vis* those more traditional approaches that, in the words of Harvey Graff, "labored under the spectre and shadows of modernization theories with their strong assumptions of literacy's role, powers, and provenance."[4] While the post-Enlightenment synthesis of humanistic and social scientific studies has crumbled, concomitant expectations have been contradicted "that literacy's roles are [. . .] relatively unmediated, highly pervasive, and requisite and responsible for individual, societal, and national advancement" (134). Together with the technology-led theory of cultural change, the idea of a 'great divide' between orality and literacy, as advanced in studies inspired by Marshall McLuhan, W. J. Ong, E. A. Havelock, and partially at least by Jack Goody,[5] has increasingly been questioned. While some of the work of these eminent scholars – such as that of Havelock on Homer and classical theatre[6] – is of considerable significance to the present project, it seems unhelpful, especially in European Renaissance studies, to isolate these

largely overlapping, interpenetrating oral and written media of communication from larger social and cultural formations, needs, and interests.

For very good reasons, then, scholarly attention has come to be focused on what is a crucial nexus in the present study – the process of interaction among written and oral forms of communication. As Ruth Finnegan, emphasizing the different ways oral and literate elements may be combined, has noted, "it is now accepted among serious students of verbal oral performance that the *text* alone is an insufficient guide to the art form" (*Literacy and Orality* 125). For one thing, as she adds in a more recent study, "the traditional Western model of 'text'," having "strong links with the concept of a verbal cognitive mode of representation," omits "the kinesic, dramatic, auditory, and visual elements so important in personal interaction" ("Literacy as Mythical Charter" 39–40). But while such preoccupation with written language may provide what is in some respects "a surprisingly misleading guide to what people are actually doing and experiencing" (40), the same question in our context needs to be formulated more cautiously. In regard to Renaissance theatrical transactions, the question is to what extent and to what purpose will "the once taken-for-granted model of the predominance of the 'text'" (40) have to be modified or supplemented? In the present essay (advisedly, I use the word for the book at large), this question must be an open one. It may well be that, when all is said and done, the recent revaluation of literacy needs to accommodate itself to a renewed awareness that "the riches to which reading and writing can lead [. . .] are part of the identity and experience of huge sections of humanity across the globe and can by no means just be wished away" (42).

However, to say this is not to minimize the degree to which dramatic writing and theatrical performing in the English Renaissance found themselves in a socially and culturally precarious state of both cooperation and confrontation, interaction and 'interface' (I use the word à la Webster, as "something that enables separate and sometimes incompatible elements to coordinate or communicate"). Without, then, in the least wishing to underrate, let alone downplay the power and the poetry that distinguish Elizabethan dramatic writing, I propose to view its forms and functions as participating, together with performance, in important shifts of social interests and cultural needs. The shifts in the circumstantial world were correlative to the very conditions in which relations of "author's pen" and "actor's voice" evolved. These relations, untried and unsettled,[7] could be viewed "not in confidence," as the Prologue to *Troilus and Cressida* puts it. In exploring the changeful relationship of "pen" and "voice," my question is, have we perhaps overlooked an important constellation of cultural practices and interests in the Elizabethan theatre that helped bring forth, in

Thomas Dekker's words, "such true scaenical authority" (Dekker, *Gull's Horn Book* 2:249)[8] as was irreducible to the dramatist's writings? And could it be that this little, brief and very vulnerable authority derived from certain types of production and performance practices that, in their relationship to the text, were not derivative, or in Michael Bristol's word, "ministerial" (*Shakespeare's America* 105)?

To answer these as yet highly conjectural questions would require that, as evidence, we recover and/or read afresh some of the traces that help us envision an alternative model of relations between "pen" and "voice." But even if we do have evidence that endows performance with a validity all its own, a new awareness of performance as a cultural practice in its own right does not by itself minimize the cultural authority of Shakespeare's text. Only, what would it mean to situate Shakespeare's text in the environment of a culture in which the new learning and writing had not fully supplanted the vitality in the oral communication of the unlettered, particularly when the transaction of that text on a stage – theatrical performance – was itself an oral-aural process?

Besides, the authority of Shakespeare's text has accrued over the centuries; it is not exclusively a product of the Elizabethan theatre. Nor is it like cultural merchandise that can be dumped when demand diminishes. This text, as Michael Bristol reminds us, must be seen not as a commodity or market value but as a "gift" that, as other "great literary works entail[s] particularly complex and onerous obligations." As I have hinted on a preceding page, such obligations require that we fully expose ourselves and our own liabilities to what this demanding text offers today; what a gift of this size requires is, in Bristol's words, "honest reflection not only about the aspirations of our civilization, but equally about its costs, its betrayals and its failures."[9]

The ways to meet these "obligations" are likely to change, though, when the uses of authorship and representation are being widely redefined. Here, for some of the most thoughtful observers, the question is how Shakespeare "can be uncoupled from the decline of the book in an increasingly post-literate society" (Lanier, "Drowning the Book" 191). As the same observer notes, there is a highly effective "tactic for exorcising the textual Shakespeare"; but if this tactic is "to forge an affiliation between performance criticism and textual criticism" (190), the present attempt to reassess Elizabethan performance practice does not pursue any such exorcism. To say that the cultural space for writing and reading in our own world at least partially is being absorbed by technologies of an audio-visual order is one thing; but it is quite another matter insouciantly to take for granted any, in a democratic sense of the word, purely beneficial results of this process. At any rate, I believe it is rash for those of us who continue to stand for,

simply by practicing, writing and reading to subscribe to "the decline of the book," rather than stubbornly continue to weigh as *pro* and *contra* its place and function in an electronically dominated new culture of information. In other words (as William Worthen has annotated this passage), "the book may be for us what orality was for Shakespeare" – still in many spheres a dominant mode of transmission.

Perhaps there are other, and better, ways to deal with "the textual Shakespeare" in "an increasingly post-literate" world. An undoubtedly valuable alliance between textual scholarship and performance criticism might just as well serve ends that – to adapt Geoffrey Hartman's phrase (and book title) – amount to "saving the text" in the circumstantial midst of its own much-invoked instability. The seeming paradox is that only by thoroughly questioning the cultural uses of the dramatic text can we realistically hope to keep it viable.

It is upon premises such as these that I propose to study both writing and playing in the Elizabethan theatre as different modes of cultural production marked by intense mutual engagements, by both disparity and concurrence. Through their interplay, live agents on stage inflect and mediate a textually inscribed semantics of representation. In the Elizabethan theatre, such inflection can modulate but also disturb the high pitch of Renaissance pathos in the representation of honor, chastity, royalty, and so forth, thereby pointing to the limits of the world-picturing "glass" or "mirror" in the text of the dramatist. At the same time, performers can sustain and enhance, through sheer impersonation, what is verbally alive and vibrant in the "mirror." My suggestion is that Elizabethan performance practice cannot be subsumed under any one purpose of playing; it must be viewed as plural, as serving a number of diverse functions, as – far from being unified or unifying – a contested field in which early modern literary meanings can be constructed but also intercepted.

To view the cultural space between text and performance in early modern culture as marked by indelible difference, it must be historicized, resituated as part of a larger social constellation of both stratification and inclusiveness, one that in both trends crucially helped shape the formative period of the Elizabethan theatre. As William Ingram, John Astington, David Bradley and others have suggested, this period by no means begins in 1586/87. Although the present study is strongly focused on the turn of the century, we need to look further to understand the extent to which, in the second half of the sixteenth century, writing and playing entered into a remarkably open, rapidly changeful relationship. Despite its much-admired results, this relationship drew upon an alliance that harbored an unsuspected degree of vulnerability and unexplored areas of friction. To say that the engagement was between a culture of orality and a culture of

literacy is, as Leah Marcus has shown in her *Unediting the Renaissance*, a crucial first step that can be especially helpful to the extent that both are perceived as mutually overlapping and interpenetrating. As we have learned from Terence Hawkes' *Shakespeare's Talking Animals*, even when a "great feast of languages" (5.1.37) is put on stage in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the celebration is not without "tension" when "the resonant world of speech is comically opposed to the silent world of writing," and "the language of books" is engaged by the oral "music of the rhyme" and the "fertile" language of love "beyond the grasp of reason" (Hawkes, *Shakespeare's Talking Animals* 53–54). Remarkably, the early Shakespeare, deeply aware of the difference between the two modes of communication, privileges the oral-aural and the practical-physical over the world of the book. The writer for performances precludes any facile bias in favor of writing; thereby, he hugely complicates relations between "author's pen" and "actor's voice." But then the cultural difference cannot exclusively be identified with that between writing and talking. In a long perspective, the difference in question was social as well as cultural, implicating divergent modes of communication as well as diverse perceptions of space and non-identical uses of dramaturgy and knowledge.

In Shakespeare's theatre, this difference was both suspended and revitalized; if the degree of interpenetration between words and bodies was unsurpassed, it was also marked by an interface more complex than can be conveyed by any notion of complementarity. In fact, the unsettled state of the ménage of "author's pen" and "actor's voice" was inseparable from both the unstable condition of the text itself and the dispersed modes of performance practice. At least two decades before the end of the century, the balance was definitely turning in favor of impersonating what figurations the increasingly predominant text was made to yield. Still, memories of a larger space filled with bodies and voices – a space that was neither abstract nor, in Raymond Williams' phrase, "representative" – continued to hold their own "in this distracted globe" (*Hamlet* 1.5.97).

One difficulty in coming to *terms* with the unfixed, changeful order of relations of "pen" and "voice" in the Elizabethan theatre is that the present study has to cope with the lack of a sustainedly helpful *terminology*. But rather than inventing one I have, wherever possible, attempted to adapt, rather than simply adopt, Elizabethan terms and concepts.

As the book's subtitle may suggest, the alternating appeal of (and to) "author's pen *or* actor's voice" was not unknown – how could it be? – to the author of *Troilus and Cressida*. From the quarto of the same play I have used "bifold authority" (the Folio has "By foule authoritie") in order to point at the difference in the courts of appeal and validity between

writing and playing, on the understanding that this difference finds a correlative in the poetics, the dramaturgy, and epistemology of the plays themselves. As I have argued elsewhere,[10] the issue of authority in its early modern connotations provides us with an extraordinary complexity that cuts right through an exclusively textual or, for that matter, juridical or political understanding.

In the Elizabethan theatre, the imaginary play-world and the material world of Elizabethan playing constitute different, although of course partially overlapping registers of perception, enjoyment, and involvement. In order to address the sites of conjunction, interplay, and duplication where "in one line two crafts directly meet" (*Hamlet* 3.4.210), I shall use the concept of 'doubleness.' Wherever such 'doubleness' assumes contestatory forms, that is, a deliberate, performance-inspired use of the cultural disparity in question, I propose to adapt, from Philip Sidney's use, in his *Defence of Poesy*, the term 'contrariety.' There, the word refers either to the process or to the agents behind the process ("our Comedients") of "mingling Kinges and Clownes" but especially the mingling of "delight" and "laughter," which "in themselves [. . .] have as it were a kind of contrarietie" (3: 39–40).

Intriguingly, Sidney might have heard – directly from the lips of some of the "Comedients" here referred to – the same word elaborated in *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576), a mid-Elizabethan moral play, where Courage the Vice repeatedly, and with variations, uses the adjective form in reference to his performance practice: "Corage contagious, / Or courage contrarious" presents himself as juggling with the "seems" of a fleeting identity: "Corage contagious, / When I am outragious, / In working of yll: / And Corage contrary, / When that I do vary, / To compass my will" (Wapull, *Tide Tarrieth* lines 93–94; 99–104). Similarly, and no less significantly, the adjective form is used in a stage direction in Thomas Lupton's *All for Money* (1577): "Here the vyce shal turne the proclamation to some contrarie sence at everie time all for money hath read it" (147).

In this instance, the "contrarie sence" must have come close to signifying a more specific effect, potentially a resistance to what was represented in the proclamation. We do not of course know anything about the actual drift of the "contrarie sence," except that the effect must have been one of 'disfigurement.' In my use of the latter term, I adapt Shakespeare's well-known phrase from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "to disfigure, or to present" (3.1.60–61), where the 'disfigurement' goes hand in hand with a presentational type of delivery.

In pleading for an understanding of Elizabethan 'performance' that is not closed to "a myriad of performance practices, ranging from stage to festival" (Parker and Sedgwick, *Performativity* 2), I am influenced by a