CHAPTER ONE

An introduction to the night-watch constable

Performance, print, memory: three preludes

17 May 1833: George Douchez, Esq., physician, contemplates the corpse of Edmund Kean. Setting about the melancholy task of dissecting the great actor, he notes 'a heart excessively loaded with fat', a 'considerably emaciated' face and neck, and a brain whose substance is 'softer than usual'. Suddenly these neutral, detached observations give way to a heightened moment of appreciation: 'Body well formed, and the external form of the thorax and the abdomen so beautifully developed as to serve as one of the finest models that could possibly be presented to the eye of the sculptor or painter' (Hillebrand 1966: 371–2). Sixteen years earlier, on 27 October 1817, *The Times* had carried a review of Kean's performance as Othello, a notice that had concluded with a comparable admiration for the detail and overall effect on the spectator of Kean's physique: 'The convulsed motions of the hands, and the involuntary swellings of the veins of the forehead in some of the most painful situations, should not only suggest topics of critical panegyric, but might furnish studies to the painter or anatomist' (Hazlitt 1930–4: XVIII 263).

That two different but related forms of memorialisation should fasten on the pictorial quality of an actor's body is perhaps unsurprising. Yet what may shift the relationship from coincidence to quotation is the fact that the theatre reviewer, William Hazlitt, felt so pleased with his initial review that he republished it, almost verbatim, on two further occasions. In 1820, in a series of essays for the *London Magazine*, Hazlitt (1930–4: XVIII 302) recycled the piece in the pseudo-anonymous guise of 'the words of a contemporary journal, a short time back'. Then, after an eight-year absence from theatre criticism, he again reproduced the review in 1828 in a nostalgic piece for *The Examiner*, the only variant being that he – for some reason – altered the final words from 'painter or anatomist' to 'painter or sculptor' (394). 'Sculptor or painter' were the two professions

that would spring to Douchez's mind five years later as he reviewed Kean's corpse.

12 June 1906: Drury Lane theatre hosts a jubilee celebration for Ellen Terry. The actress's fiftieth year on the stage prompts a remarkable display of affection on both sides of the proscenium. In a varied programme, performers as diverse as Eleonora Duse, Enrico Caruso, Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Benoît Coquelin and Herbert Beerbohm Tree either accompanied the dedicatee in abbreviated scenes or else offered solo turns in her honour. The matinee began shortly after midday, continued for six hours, and would have lasted longer had Terry not been required to act that evening as Lady Cicely Waynflete in a production of George Bernard Shaw's *Captain Brassbound's Conversion.* Drury Lane was the perfect symbolic setting for this exercise in nostalgia; in her address to the audience, Terry thanked Mr Collins, 'who has lent this great theatre with its inspiring memories' (Agate 1946: 144), memories that, despite repeated destruction and reconstruction, stretched back to 1663. The theatre of Edmund Kean and W.C. Macready also had more recent memories for those present: a newspaper reported that at the conclusion of the proceedings 'The audience sang "Auld Lang Syne" just as it did at Sir Henry Irving's final appearance at the same theatre just a year ago' (145). After the song, the audience slowly, reluctantly dispersed. The performance was over, but the process of remembering had just begun: 'the jaded pittites blinked as they emerged into daylight and bought evening papers that they might read about it all before going to bed' (145). Gripped by an instant nostalgia for what they had witnessed, the pittites (and presumably other sections of the audience) resorted to print media to prolong the experience a little further. When they woke up next day they might have consulted the morning papers, which had a 'more leisured say' on the event and the ability to reprint and comment on 'the speeches which were delivered late in the afternoon' of the jubilee (143).

I do not know who wrote the above press account of the jaded pittites. It was one of fifteen hundred press cuttings related to the London theatre in the period 1897–1906 sent by parcel to *Sunday Times* critic and publishing machine James Agate in May 1946. The names of the papers had been deleted by the original collector and Agate 'refrain[ed] from guesswork' (Agate 1946: xi). This parcel supplemented another package of newspaper reviews anonymously sent to Agate in 1940, and, in June 1946, forty years after Ellen Terry's jubilee, Agate edited the two donations into a book, *Those Were the Nights*. The book was aimed at 'readers who', like Terry's pittites, 'would call back yesterday' (1). Three years earlier, Agate had produced a

similar anthology of reviews, *These Were Actors*, based on press cuttings bequeathed to him by Clement Scott, the most influential critic of the late nineteenth century.

12 September 2012: the morning after press night for Michael Attenborough's production of *King Lear* starring Jonathan Pryce at the Almeida Theatre, London. Charles Spencer began his *Daily Telegraph* review: 'Back in 1980, Jonathan Pryce caused a sensation with his performance as Hamlet, the hoop through which every aspiring classical actor must jump. Those who saw it will never forget the extraordinary scene in which he seemed to become physically possessed by the ghost of his dead father' (Spencer 2012). Spencer's image of the hoop-jumping actor silently quotes Max Beerbohm's review of Sarah Bernhardt's Hamlet of 1899 in which Beerbohm lamented: 'In England, as I suggested some time ago, "Hamlet" has long ceased to be treated as a play. It has become simply a hoop through which every eminent actor must, sooner or later, jump. The eminent actor may not have any natural impulse to jump through it, but that does not matter' (Beerbohm 1953: 36). Beerbohm's review is itself quotational: in this case a self-reference to one of the first pieces he wrote for the *Saturday Review* in which he complained that watching over-produced plays – such as Shakespeare's – was a haunted experience: the memory of previous Macbeths, Hamlets, Othellos fogged up the brain, cluttered the act of reception and prompted a dreary 'kind of comparative criticism . . . The play is dead. The stage is crowded with ghosts. Every head in the audience is a heavy casket of reminiscence' (9). Spencer's review kept alive the memory not only of Pryce's Hamlet of 1980, but also of Beerbohm's criticism of 1899: his review, no less than Pryce's Hamlet, was possessed by the ghost of a dead father.

On the following morning, 13 September 2012, Michael Billington's review of *Hedda Gabler* at the Old Vic began: 'Ibsen's Hedda was once described as the hoop through which every aspiring female actor must jump; and Sheridan Smith performs the feat with commendable ease and agility' (Billington 2012a). As in Spencer, 'aspiring' has replaced Beerbohm's original 'eminent'. But who was it exactly that 'once described' the Hedda hoop? Perhaps it was Billington himself, who wrote a generation earlier in 1991: '*Hedda Gabler* is now one of the most frequently performed of all Ibsen's plays, while the title role has become the female equivalent of Hamlet, the hoop through which most ambitious actresses feel obliged to jump' (*TR* 1991: 1060). The hoop, it would appear, is on a loop.

Anyone who read Spencer and Billington's reviews online could also record their own thoughts in the comments section placed beneath the

review. (They could also click on a sidebar advert run throughout September and October 2012, promoting a course of 'six in-depth masterclasses on writing theatre reviews' led by *Guardian* critics.) Beneath Spencer's review Tom Snood wondered 'Why do theatres never bung a camera in the audience so that after the run we could all see it on telly? They used to do it with Whitehall Farces I seem to recall.' Billington's nuanced and lukewarm account of *Hedda* generated more debate, the last word on which fell to the unpronounceable 'HTPBDET': 'Apart from *Judas Kiss* or *Curious Incident*, both of which I have not yet seen, this is easily the best play on stage in London at present. See it for yourself.'

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Many of Shakespeare's plays end with the promise of continued conversation. For the last two and a half centuries, newspaper reviews have been a vital part of that conversation and have played a key role in the collective experience of theatregoing and theatre-talking. Of all the textual inscriptions of performance, journalistic reviews are both the most widely circulated and the most influentially constitutive of memory and value. Reviews have been the primary vehicle in which performance is described and evaluated, and through which vicarious experience, opinion and reputation are propagated. This book explores the conditions – theatrical, journalistic, personal and social – in which journalistic critics have received Shakespearean performance from the origins of newspaper reviewing in the mid eighteenth century to the present day.

The preludes above offer three Polaroids from the theatrical past and announce the key themes of this book: death and deadlines; ephemerality and permanence; memory and nostalgia; quotation and recycling; surrogation and succession; authority and legitimacy. British Shakespearean theatre reviewing – no less than the performances it chronicles – has its own traditions, conventions, habits, lineages and anxieties. It is insistently intertextual and constantly recycles past writing and past experiences ('Those who saw it will never forget') in an effort to resurrect the fallen, make visible the vanished, and endow the present with shape and meaning. Erin Diamond writes: 'While a performance embeds traces of other performances, it also produces an experience whose interpretation only partially depends on previous experience. Hence the terminology of "re" in discussion of performance, as in *re*member, *re*inscribe, *re*configure, *re*iterate, *re*store' (Diamond 1995: 2). And, one might add, rehearse, repeat, reminisce and *re*view. The extent of theatregoers' dependence on previous experience – their own and others – is greater in a crowded and high-status performance

tradition such as that of Shakespearean production. As Beerbohm noted, when watching many Shakespeare plays on stage, the individual and collective head is 'a heavy casket of reminiscence', and those reminiscences can be traced not merely to prior empirical encounters with the same play or performers or theatre spaces, but also to the extent of one's exposure to the body of second-hand memories, gossip and folklore that has built up over four hundred years of theatre practice. For Beerbohm this was a melancholy prospect, but many recognise the lively play of voluntary and involuntary memory as one of the chief pleasures of repeated theatregoing. Marvin Carlson, in common with many theorists of the stage, sees in all theatre a more or less therapeutic negotiation with the fact of mortality: 'the simultaneous attraction to and fear of the dead, the need continually to rehearse and renegotiate the relationship with memory and the past, is nowhere more specifically expressed in human culture than in theatrical performance' (Carlson 2003: 167); it is inevitable then that – whatever other functions they serve – newspaper theatre reviews are these attractions and fears made print, offering widely read post-mortems on who or what appeared again last night, and whether or not or how it died. For Carlson, Herbert Blau, Joseph Roach and others, performance is always ghosted, always productive of the uncanny sensation that '*we are seeing what we saw before*' (Blau 1987: 173). Perhaps it was so when Douchez gazed down on Kean's corpse – perhaps he had seen Kean before on stage with his own eyes, or perhaps he had seen Kean in print and *in extremis* through the eyewitness accounts of William Hazlitt.

HTPBDET's parting injunction – 'See it for yourself' – has the potential to render the expert critic impotent and redundant. The general public's agency and opinion are sovereign; one can certainly be a theatregoer without reading reviews. But the reverse is entirely conceivable. Indeed, when it comes to performances that history, geography or even economics have placed beyond our spectatorship, we may be entirely dependent on the critic whose presence at the performance acts as a surrogate for our own. Reading and writing reviews puts us into relationships of informational dependency and influence, just as the above anecdotes are stories of triangulated (Kean–Hazlitt–Douchez) or squared (Beerbohm–Spencer–Billington–Pryce) kinship groups, partly inflamed by what Harold Bloom (1997: 38), in another context, has called 'influenza'. We should note here that while women – such as Ellen Terry and Sheridan Smith – have often been the subjects of criticism, they have only rarely (and mostly very recently) been the authors of it; the default setting for Shakespearean reviewing is that of a male critic writing about male actors. It may therefore come as little surprise that the

following pages repeat and rehearse successive moments of crisis, competition and rivalry. In doing so, they obsessively turn and return to *Macbeth*, that drama of anxious and competitive masculinity, of success, surcease and succession. In that play's violent struggles, performance anxieties and multiple hauntings I see a vivid premonition of the structures of reception and the fraught psychology of Shakespearean theatre reviewing.

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This is the first book-length study of the relationship between journalist reviewers and Shakespearean performance. That no one has thought to write a book about this before perhaps indicates the low esteem in which scholars have held journalists and journalistic criticism. In the following section of this introduction I describe the cultural reputation of newspaper criticism as a secondary, parasitic pursuit conducted in the compromising context of journalism. Through a comparison with the history of English literary criticism and with the relatively recent figure of the academic Shakespeare reviewer, I then define the distinctive qualities and conditions of journalistic reviewing and its insecure status as a profession. Next I survey the precedents for this book, the articles on Shakespearean reviewing and the books on theatre criticism that have attempted to take seriously the various relationships between performance, journalistic practice, reviewers and the shifting but ever-powerful figure of Shakespeare. Finally, I discuss the problems posed by writing a history of Shakespearean theatre reviewing, before setting out the parameters and argument of this study.

Eunuchs in a harem: the cultural reputation of the critic

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the hitherto cynical bachelor Berowne has fallen hopelessly in love, against his vows, with one of the ladies who attend on the visiting French Princess. He marvels at the metamorphosis:

> And I, forsooth, in love – I that have been love's whip,
> A very beadle to a humorous sigh,
> A critic, nay, a night-watch constable,
> A domineering pedant o'er the boy [Cupid],
> Than whom no mortal so magnificent. (3.1.169–73)

This contest between the Critic and Love later springs to Berowne's mind when he overhears all three of his friends reveal their own secret desires for the remaining members of the Gallic contraband. Stepping forth to 'whip hypocrisy', he hypocritically laments *their* undignified transformations: seeing them love-sick, he says, is like watching wise

Solomon dance a jig, or 'critic Timon laugh at idle toys!' (4.3.168). These two related references mark the only times in all his plays that Shakespeare used the word 'critic'. It is synonymous with a range of institutional killjoys: the parish officer or 'beadle' who whips offenders, the 'night-watch constable' who catches them and the 'domineering pedant' from whose instruction they have clearly failed to benefit: all agents of law enforcement, justice and corrective instruction, all sworn enemies to love, freedom and libido. References elsewhere to the figure of the 'Critick' (whether of literature, society or the drama) in early modern English plays, poems and pamphlets describe a figure who is carping, currish, choleric, sharp-sighted, narrow-eyed, stubborn, severe, musty-visaged and foul-mouthed. These largely negative, even repellent, connotations are still familiar. The role of the critic is still popularly perceived to be one of a fault-finder, a traffic warden of the emotions, a fly in the soup at life's feast.

Playwrights and audiences have always found it pleasurable and therapeutic to traduce the integrity and competence of the night-watch constable. In Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779), Puff, albeit endearingly, represents the corruptibility of the emergent trade. Shaw frames *Fanny's First Play* (1911) with the arrival and departure of four critics whose acuity ranges from the gentle insights of Trotter (modelled, with the critic's blessing, on A.B. Walkley) to the hackery of Flawner Bannal, 'an unemployable of the business class picking up a living by an obtuse courage which gives him cheerfulness', who has 'a slight turn for writing, and . . . a comfortable ignorance and lack of intuition which hides from him all the dangers and disgraces that keep men of finer perception in check' (Shaw [1911] 1934: 655). But the nadir of the critic's cultural reputation is soundly plumbed in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which Didi and Gogo's game of mutual abuse descends the chain of being:

> VLADIMIR: Moron!
> ESTRAGON: Vermin!
> VLADIMIR: Abortion!
> ESTRAGON: Morpion!
> VLADIMIR: Sewer-rat!
> ESTRAGON: Curate!
> VLADIMIR: Cretin!
> ESTRAGON: [*With finality.*] Crrritic!
> VLADIMIR: Oh!
> [*He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.*]
> (Beckett 1986: 70)

In at least two instances, contempt for theatre critics has led to elaborate fantasies of criticide. In Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968),

the metatheatrical and the metacritical collide as we oversee two critics, Birdboot and Moon, watching a new whodunit and subsequently overhear them reviewing each other's reviews. In a surreal finale, the egregiously pompous pair become trapped in the inner fiction of the whodunit and are promptly murdered. Moon and his deputy, Higgs, are dispatched by the paper's third-string critic, Puckeridge, who ends the play well positioned to achieve every critic's dream of seeing his 'entire review in neon' (Stoppard 1968: 15) outside a theatre.

The deaths at the climax of Stoppard's play are frugal when compared with the multiple critical casualties of the Hammer Horror movie *Theatre of Blood* (1973), later entertainingly adapted for the stage by Lee Simpson and Phelim McDermott for Improbable at the National Theatre in 2005. The Shakespearean actor-manager, Edward Lionheart, has faked his own suicide after repeatedly being denied the Critics' Circle award for best actor. His revenge against the reviewers who have variously slated, mocked or slept through his leads is to dispatch each of them in a Shakespearean manner: Hector Snipe is butchered by 'myrmidons' and his corpse horse-dragged through a fellow critic's funeral; Larding is drowned in a butt of malmsey; a female critic is electrocuted at the hairdressers in a nod to the inflammatory end of Joan la Pucelle; while act four of *The Merchant of Venice* is rewritten ('you'll find we've made some alterations to the text – and one rather large cut') to allow Lionheart's Shylock to remove his pound of flesh. This is snuff Shakespeare. Far too few films can boast of lines like: 'Four of my colleagues have been murdered and their deaths relate directly to your father's last repertory season.'

The Real Inspector Hound and *Theatre of Blood* take to a playfully logical extreme the widely held perception that theatre reviewers are jealous parasites on the body of art, and that no creative person would mourn their loss. Many actors and directors, for example, are apt to stress the impertinent superfluity of criticism by claiming never to read their reviews. With some alteration to diction, this interchange from the opening scene of *The Critic* can still be heard in the green rooms of the contemporary theatre:

> DANGLE: Well, Sir Fretful, I wish you may be able to get rid as easily of the newspaper criticisms as you do of ours.
>
> SIR FRETFUL: The newspapers! Sir, they are the most villainous – licentious – abominable – infernal – Not that I ever read them – no – I make it a rule never to look into a newspaper. (Sheridan [1779] 1940: 24)

And here is that great (spoof) classical actor Nicholas Craig, writing about critics in his revealing memoir, *I, An Actor*:

> It has always been my very strictest rule never *ever* to look at reviews. Not even a peek. My newsagent is bound on pain of lingering death not to come within a hundred miles of me after one of my first nights. Inevitably, friends will read out particularly flattering bits on the phone but I never take any notice, and it has never occurred to me, for instance, to have these excerpts enlarged then take them into the bathroom, cover them with marshmallows and roll naked on them until I'm exhausted. (Craig 1989: 43–4)

At the heart of this studied indifference to critics is an anxiety about their influence, a submerged recognition that the value of performance is mediated, first and foremost, in newspaper columns, and that the performer's fame – immediate and lasting – heavily depends on the written word. As Brecht said of theatre critics: 'What they say about my plays doesn't matter, my plays will survive the critics, but what they say about my productions matters very much because what they write is all that posterity will know of the subject' (quoted in E. Bentley 415).

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, analogies for the critic's function have persistently sought to deny criticism's validity and potency. When playwright Christopher Hampton was once asked what he thought of theatre critics, he replied that one might as well 'ask the lamp post what it feels about dogs' (Stefanova 2000: 82). In another gesture to the scatological, Robert Gore-Langton, the *Sunday Express*'s critic in the late 1990s, described reviewers as people who are 'paid through the nose to talk out of their arses' (Stefanova 2000: 83). But perhaps the analogy that portrays critics at their most superfluous and stunted was that of the Irish playwright Brendan Behan. Critics are like eunuchs in a harem, he claimed: 'they see it done every day but can't do it themselves' (Stefanova 2000: 83). In a more plangent key, George Steiner (1967: 21) reinforced the analogy between criticism and impotence: 'when he looks back, the critic sees a eunuch's shadow'. Walter Raleigh, while writing primarily about literary criticism at the dawn of the twentieth century, encapsulated in a letter the worst-case scenario for critics of any art form. Expanding on his earlier claim that 'the eunuch was the first modern critic', he wrote:

> I can't help feeling that critical admiration for what another man has written is an emotion for spinsters. Shakes. didn't want it. Jerome K. Jerome is in some ways a far decenter writer than Brunetière or Saintsbury or any of the professed critics. He goes and begets a brat for himself, and doesn't pule about other people's amours. If I write an autobiography it shall be called 'Confessions of a Pimp'. (Quoted in Baldick 1983: 78–9)

English literary criticism has generally been more confident of its aims and functions than either Steiner or Raleigh's melancholy and macho

analogies of emasculation would suggest. Chris Baldick's account of *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848–1932*, for example, chronicles the often staggering claims to cultural authority made by and on behalf of the literary critic. Criticism, from Matthew Arnold to the Leavises, was proposed as a culture-saving activity of the civilised mind, a high calling with significant social implications. If so-called Great Literature was the panacea to a number of societal ailments (class division, the decline of religious feeling, industrialisation, rampant commercialism), the critic's duty was to administer the dose and make sure the sick and the needy received the right prescription. Delivering the dose became easier as the act of literary criticism was institutionalised, whether in Civil Service exams or in the widespread emergence of English studies in universities. No such ambitious legacy or process of institutionalisation can be found in the history of journalistic theatre reviewing. The harems in which Raleigh pimped his trade were the actually rather respectable milieus of the lecture hall and the college tutorial – not to mention between the redoubtable covers of the *Men of Letters* series. The harem of the theatre reviewer is that promiscuous space, the newspaper column. If literature is a vocation, journalism is merely a career, and the newspaper reviewer, embroiled in the dirt, deadlines and commercialism of Grub Street, cannot hope for the disinterested authority of the Arnoldian literary critic. It is hard to imagine any literary critic, on the record at least, defining his occupation as one of getting paid through the nose to talk out of his arse.

Night-watch constables, men of letters and domineering pedants

To tease out the peculiar identity of the night-watch constable it is instructive to compare him to two close relatives: the literary critic and the academic performance critic, each of whom might be regarded as a subspecies of Berowne's 'domineering pedant'.

Theatre reviewing evolved in London in the mid eighteenth century for a number of reasons, not least of which was that theatre had reached the fruitful condition of being both sufficiently socially acceptable to discuss in bourgeois company and also a source of apparently endless controversy: 'acceptable controversy' – or 'news'. In a relatively small theatrical economy such as London in the 1740s, one could easily see everything. What one should feel and *say* about what one saw was much less clear. Historically, the church or the court had set standards of taste and interpretation, but, in the ever-expanding public sphere of clubs and coffee houses and the proliferating pages of new journals and periodicals of the Enlightenment