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CHAPTER I

The problem, the evidence, and the language barrier

"You speak a language that I understand not"
The Winter's Tale, 3.2.79

The terms invoked in this book's title trail with them various problems. To concentrate upon *recovering* X from the past, especially the theatrical past, is to set in motion a process that makes some readers and many theatrical professionals uncomfortable, even hostile. Admittedly, historically oriented scholars attuned to such disciplines as philology, iconography, and "ideas-of-the-time" contextual interpretation will find my goals and methods familiar, even self-evident. Such scholars will agree with John Shearman who, in his study of Mannerism, notes that "contemporary standards" of our age not only "do not give the right guidance to understanding a past age" but, in fact, can be "a positive hindrance." Rather, he argues: "In decoding messages from the other side we get more meaningful results if we use their code rather than ours," for "wherever possible a work of art should be interpreted by throwing it back into the nest of ideas in which it was born."[1]

As practiced for several generations, however, the invocation and application of a Renaissance "nest of ideas" or "code" in Shakespeare studies has led to many oversimplified formulations and interpretations, so that post-structuralists attuned to indeterminacy, free play, and the death of the author may understandably be dubious when confronted with claims about "recovery." Similarly, theatrical professionals hostile to "museum theatre" are justifiably suspicious of scholarly accounts that use purported Elizabethan stage practice to set up strictures about what should and should not be done in today's pro-

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ductions. For both communities, to focus upon recovering the theatrical practice of the past is to send up danger signals.

Nonetheless, some actors and directors *are* interested in the onstage rationale behind the Shakespeare playscripts with which they wrestle – even though they do not feel bound to reproduce such effects. Historical or historicist interpretations, moreover, are much in fashion of late in scholarly journals, especially in English Renaissance studies, so that a reinvestigation of the tangled evidence at the roots of what we know (or think we know) about the staging of plays at the Theatre, the Globe, and the Blackfriars would seem to be relevant to various projects that build upon the interactions between the play-as-event and the playgoer (e.g., the concept of negotiations or circulation of social energy advanced by Stephen Greenblatt).[2] To what were the original playgoers responding or reacting? How can we tell today? What difference do (or should) such findings make for our interpretations on the page, on the stage, or in the classroom?

In the chapters that follow, moreover, I do not offer an interpretation of Shakespeare's plays in terms of "the ideas-of-the-time." In his critique of these and other interpretations linked to "context," Richard Levin notes in passing the value of the contextual material "supplied for us by the footnotes in modern scholarly editions of works of the past," annotations that provide "the knowledge necessary to construe the very meaning of the words of the text and understand the social customs and institutions, the proverbial lore, the beliefs, and the like that these words allude to." Such material, he observes, "should probably be considered an extension of the very general context of 'language'" and therefore "a necessary preliminary to any interpretation." The use of such "linguistic" contexts, he concludes, is "preinterpretive," for "the interpreter does not have to decide whether or not to apply it (although he may certainly be ignorant of it)." Rather, "like the language itself, it precedes the contexts that present him with conscious choices."[3]

My goal in this book is to recover or reconstitute comparable preinterpretive materials that, ideally, "like the language

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itself," should form the basis for would-be historical or historicist interpretations of Shakespeare's plays. My project is therefore analogous to that of a philologist, an iconographer, or an archaeologist (or a student of discursive and signifying practices) but with a focus not upon words, icons, or lost artifacts (or theatres) but upon theatrical strategy and techniques taken for granted by Shakespeare, his player-colleagues, and his playgoers. My emphasis will therefore fall upon some building blocks (analogous to nouns, verbs, and prepositions), particularly those alien to our literary and theatrical ways of thinking today and hence likely to be blurred or filtered out by editors, readers, and theatrical professionals. Whether or not the "author" as agency is dead, someone or some group in the 1590s and early 1600s made choices that led to something being acted out on the stage. My concern is with that something – what the original playgoers saw or might have seen.

To recover or reconstitute elements in those original performances, however, is to confront formidable, at times insurmountable, problems. The participial form that begins my title is therefore important to my formulation, for this book is, at best, a beginning, the start of an ongoing process that can only be advanced by future editors, bibliographers, critics, theatre historians, historicists of many stripes, and theatrical professionals (groups that, unfortunately, do not speak the same languages). My goal is to provide a book with implications for all those who interpret these plays (and, as in my earlier book on stage conventions, I include editors in the category *interpreters*), but, as in that earlier study, I am less concerned with individual readings (which, at times, I cannot resist suggesting) than with the larger process. Indeed, one of my major agendas is to expand the options for interpreters, whatever their medium (production, edition, essay, lecture) and whatever their professed or unacknowledged ideology. No proposition or project, we are constantly reminded, is ideology-free, especially the appeal to so-called "common sense" (so that my own assumptions about history and authority are already evident), but, in spite of the difficulties with a "dictionary" approach set forth in chapter 3, I have sought whenever possible to model my

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procedures, categories, and invocation of examples on entries in the *OED* or an iconographical handbook. What use others make of my findings or options is not (and should not be) under my control.

Behind my title, moreover, lurks a series of linked assumptions, so, to reduce the level of mystification at the outset, let me begin by singling out two basic propositions. First, in putting quill to paper Shakespeare was crafting not *literary texts* (to be read and interpreted by readers) but *theatrical scripts* (to be bodied forth by actor-colleagues, with whom he was in close contact, and then interpreted by playgoers). In one form or another, this proposition has been widely promulgated in recent decades, to the point that it has spawned a so-called "performance" criticism approach to Shakespeare's plays and, more recently (and inevitably), some shrewd revisionist critiques (both from sympathizers and opponents).[4] No surprises here.

Few of those in this ongoing performance-oriented debate, however, are much concerned with a second (and to me equally crucial) proposition: that Shakespeare designed those playscripts for players, playgoers, and playhouses that no longer exist. Ay, there's the rub. The thirty-seven playscripts (a number that includes *Pericles* and *Henry VIII* but excludes *The Two Noble Kinsmen*) *do* survive (in whatever altered state or multiple versions) in the form of the early quartos (nineteen plays, all save *Othello* in print during the author's lifetime) and the 1623 First Folio (where eighteen plays appear for the first time seven years after the author's death). Most of us know them, however, insofar as they have been filtered through the editorial tradition that started in the eighteenth century and has culminated in our generation in the New Arden series, the Wells–Taylor Oxford editions, and several other impressive volumes or sets of volumes (including excellent facsimiles of the original quartos and First Folio). Nonetheless, the players who enacted those scripts (presumably with the playwright at hand and, for part of his career, in the cast) are gone, leaving behind little evidence about their technique or style of performance. Moreover, the original playgoers who supported this highly competitive commercial theatre are also gone (despite the

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efforts of Ann Jennalie Cook and Andrew Gurr to characterize them) as are all of the playhouses of the period (in contrast to the situation in Spain).[5]

Sam Wanamaker's project (along with his team of scholars, architects, and other experts) to reconstruct the Globe Theatre near its original site is an attempt to recover or reconstitute the second of those four components (to join the extant playscripts). But even if we accept the authenticity of that reconstruction, the would-be theatrical historicist should not lose sight of the obvious: at the original Globe, the playwright, players, and playgoers would have shared what I am terming a theatrical vocabulary (linked, in large part, to what could and could not be done on their stage) that is lost or blurred today. The process of playing the original scripts (as opposed to today's editorial text) in that reconstructed Globe *may* lead to the recovery or rediscovery of signifiers in that shared vocabulary that Shakespeare, his colleagues, and his audience took for granted. Even in this potential laboratory or testing ground, however, such a process of investigation is highly vulnerable to contamination by post-Elizabethan theatrical thinking wherein actors and directors instinctively translate the original onstage logic into our 1990s idiom (a process that can produce exciting productions for today's audiences but nonetheless interferes with any quest for recovery).

Behind my overall formulation and especially my second proposition therefore lies the assumption (reinforced again and again over many years of wrestling with such problems) that we no longer speak the same theatrical language as did Shakespeare and his contemporaries.[6] Rather, my working model or paradigm is: in reading one of the early printed texts of a Shakespeare play, we enter into the middle of a conversation – a discourse in a language we only partly understand – between a dramatist and his actor-colleagues, a halfway stage that was completed in a performance now lost to us. Although we will never reconstitute that performance, we may be able to recover elements of that vocabulary and hence better understand that conversation. To recover that lost vocabulary, however, requires a fresh, uncompromised look at the only plentiful

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evidence, the extant scripts. The alternative is the situation engendered by Leontes, to whom Hermione can say: "You speak a language that I understand not" (3.2.79).

By this point the reader not attuned to the many forays into Elizabethan theatres and theatrical practice (and perhaps familiar with various straightforward handbook formulations) may be puzzled (this author doth protest too much, methinks). Why should an attempt to recover what the original playgoers actually saw pose so many problems and challenges? The answers to that question are fundamental to this book and are the focus for this chapter. To begin a journey towards recovery and discovery by calling attention to the many potholes, detours, and unmapped roadways may appear unventuresome to some readers, particularly those who prefer bold formulations, but the murkiness of the terrain demands caution. In Brutus' terms, such a situation "craves wary walking" (2.1.15).

The most important reason for the difficulties in recovering Shakespeare's theatrical vocabulary is painfully simple. Most of the relevant evidence, including many things so obvious to players and playgoers in the 1590s and early 1600s as to be taken for granted, has been lost – as much as ninety percent, perhaps even more. Having written a book on the performance history of *Titus Andronicus*, I am more aware than most scholars of the difficulty of reconstituting a twentieth-century production I have not seen, even when photographs, print reviews, and interviews with participants are available. For the study of the performances of Elizabethan–Jacobean plays, however, almost no external evidence is available (and the few eyewitness accounts or other documents that *have* survived are often unreliable or hard to interpret – most notably, the drawing of the Swan Theatre). As a result, the primary, often sole evidence for the recovery of stage practice and theatrical vocabulary lies in the many surviving printed texts of plays, the extant manuscripts (at least sixteen with links to the playhouses), the "plots" or "plats," and a few other relevant documents (e.g., Philip Henslowe's papers).[7] Missing so much basic information about performance and playhouse practice, scholars and theatre historians have generated formulations composed of varying

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combinations of facts, inferences, and hypotheses, with those inferences and hypotheses often hardening into facts after years of use and application. The surprises occasioned by the evidence unearthed at the site of the Rose Theatre are only the latest of many such chastening revelations that have bumped up against long received opinions. And thereby hangs my tale.

Not only theatre historians but editors too must regularly confront such problems. Consider the useful terms and distinctions provided by Philip Gaskell in his revealing treatment of Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*. In this formulation, a work "intended to be communicated primarily by spoken performance rather than by a written text characteristically goes through three textual stages." First comes "the script, the written version of what was originally intended to be said." Second comes "the performance text, what is actually said in one or more performances." Finally comes "the reading text, the version subsequently published by author or editor as a record of what might or should have been said." As Gaskell notes, "anyone who has written a lecture, has delivered it, and has published it, will recognize these three textual stages; and they are especially apparent in plays, in which the second stage, the performance text, is developed not by the author alone but by the director and the actors as well."[8]

Gaskell's three categories pertain as well to manuscripts and printed texts in the age of Shakespeare. Ben Jonson and Sir William Berkeley reclaimed their plays from the players and self-consciously prepared reading texts unconstrained by the limitations (or "contamination") of the playhouse (so that for most of Jonson's plays any sense of the original performance text has been blurred if not lost). The extant playhouse manuscripts form a category comparable to Gaskell's performance texts (although the differences between these documents and nineteenth or twentieth-century prompt-books often are more revealing than the similarities). When dealing with one group of Shakespeare's plays, editors regularly refer to the dramatist's "foul papers" or fair copy, terms that denote authorial scripts that would have been presented to an Elizabethan theatrical company. Yet, with the possible exception of a fragment of *Sir*

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Thomas More, no Shakespeare manuscript has survived, so that, even though much has been inferred from painstaking analysis of the printed quartos and the First Folio, scholars have no empirical evidence about Shakespeare's working practices in his scripts or authorial drafts (whether "foul" or "fair" papers or, as is likely, some mixture of the two). The nature of the manuscript copy that lies behind a printed text is of crucial importance to an editor (so that inferences about that printer's copy take up considerable space in most textual introductions), but, despite the long accepted, even hallowed, terms and distinctions set up by bibliographical giants such as R. B. McKerrow, W. W. Greg, and Fredson Bowers, the various litmus tests for making such determinations are not reliable (and recently have come under attack).[9]

A related area of contention or puzzlement arises from varying views about the presence and role of "the author" or "authorial intention." For many readers, to invoke Shakespeare's name in my title is merely to place this book in that larger realm of "Shakespeare studies" (and therefore to add to the already overcrowded shelves), but, in some circles, to invoke Shakespeare as "author" or unitary agent responsible for the extant texts is to move onto contested ground. In recent years, strong arguments have been advanced against transhistorical meaning and "essentialism," particularly as applied to the great-minded Swan of Avon who so well understood the human heart that his plays stand as paradigms not for an age but for all time. In another arena, attacks have been mounted against the long-standing editorial goal of providing a text as close as possible to the "author's intentions."[10] To posit a Shakespearean theatrical vocabulary available to be recovered is then to run afoul of some vigorous theoretical and bibliographical arguments.

These arguments cannot be lightly dismissed. As a confirmed pluralist, I too am uncomfortable with a monistic approach to interpretation that seeks to recover the author's "intention" or unitary meaning, "true" both then and now and evident to the discerning reader. As both a theatrical historian and an inveterate playgoer, moreover, I am also conscious of the

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collaborative nature of theatrical practice in which the dramatist is a major but not the only contributor to what eventually happens onstage. In addition, I am aware of the tangled editorial and bibliographical problems generated by the early printed texts of "Shakespeare's" plays wherein what the dramatist originally wrote or approved or what was presented in the first productions is very much in doubt (the Hecate scenes in *Macbeth* can serve as one chastening example). Not only has much evidence been lost, but the primary evidence that has survived carries with it many attendant problems and perplexities.

To apply Gaskell's distinctions to the early printed editions of Shakespeare's plays is therefore to confront a series of knotty problems with which every editor must contend. Those editorial problems, in turn, are comparable to but not always identical with the equally difficult problems confronting the theatre historian who must build edifices upon the same evidence, the early printed texts. For an excellent introduction to both sets of problems, consider the lucid formulation provided by Gary Taylor. The original manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays (Gaskell's *scripts*), as Taylor notes, "were not written for that consortium of readers called 'the general public'" but "were written instead to be read by a particular group of actors, his professional colleagues and personal friends, who would in turn communicate the plays through performance to a wider public." Shakespeare could therefore "rely on this first special readership to 'edit' his manuscript, at least mentally and perhaps physically, as they read it"; and, more important to the theatre historian, "he could also rely on those readers to bring to the reading much specialist knowledge about the conditions and working practices of the contemporary theatre, and the circumstances of the specific company to which they and he belonged."

Shakespeare's ability to rely upon his colleagues, in turn, has significant implications for any attempt at "recovery" today, for, as Taylor goes on to observe: "The written text of any such manuscript thus depended upon an unwritten para-text which always accompanied it: an invisible life-support system of stage

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directions, which Shakespeare could either expect his first readers to supply, or which those first readers would expect Shakespeare himself to supply orally." The problem for the editor and especially the theatre historian, then, is that "the earliest editions of the plays all fail, more or less grossly, to supply this unwritten text." Subsequent editors (including Taylor and Stanley Wells in their Oxford edition) have sought "to rectify the deficiency, by conjecturally writing for him the stage directions which Shakespeare himself assumed or spoke but never wrote," but, as Taylor admits, "to fill such lacunae is necessarily hazardous: necessary, if we are to relish the texts as scripts for theatrical performance, but hazardous, because the filling which modern editors concoct might not always be to Shakespeare's taste."[11]

Taylor's formulation is geared towards the editorial practice in a monumental project, a practice that involves a distinctive and controversial approach to stage directions.[12] In such a project, the filling in of lacunae is understandable, perhaps inevitable, for, as Jerome J. McGann has noted, "the pursuit of textual studies has been carried out by people whose practical concerns are circumscribed by their editorial aims or by that subset of related, largely technical problems that bear upon editorial method (e.g., the preoccupation in recent years with the problem of copy text)." McGann argues, however, "that textual criticism is a field of inquiry that supervenes the narrower issues that concern editors, and that textual criticism is a pursuit incumbent upon anyone who works with and teaches literary products." In this formulation, "textual criticism does not meet its fate in the completion of a text or an edition of some particular work" but rather "is a special method that students of literature must and should use when they examine, interpret, and reproduce the works we inherit from the past."[13]

To McGann's students of literature should be added students of performance or theatrical vocabulary. Indeed, given the often differing goals of the theatre historian and the editor, the former cannot build upon the latter's text, especially a text that "necessarily" fills in theatrical lacunae, even when that filling

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