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0521810302 - Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance

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## INTRODUCTION

*Dramatic performativity and the force  
of performance*

This is a book about a small slice of performance: the stage performance of scripted drama. Until fairly recently dramatic performance provided the paradigm of performance analysis; the salutary impact of the massive globalization of performance, and an energetic expansion of scholarly and critical practice in the fields of literary, theatre, and performance studies, have now displaced dramatic theatre as the paradigm of *performance*. This expansion of our ways of understanding and analyzing performance has had – or should have – critical consequences for our understanding of drama, both as a literary genre and on the stage. Although a corner of drama studies has usually been occupied by “performance criticism” and the stage history of plays, in the past three decades the discussion of dramatic performance has been innovated by the importing of methods from anthropology and ethnography, from the psychoanalytic semiotics of film and media studies, from critical practices derived from phenomenology, from the densely materialist consideration of performance practices in cultural studies, and even from a new attention to the ways the changing character of printed texts changes the material “performance” of writing in history. Disciplinary divisions still have an edge, of course, and the energetic expansion of the field of performance studies has sometimes framed an overly static, even simplistic understanding of dramatic performance. Despite recent enthusiasm for the idea of “performance” in literary studies, there, too, the critical gain promised by “performance” is often tacitly set apart from a sense of the banality of dramatic theatre.

*Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance* frames a discussion of the working of dramatic performance now, at the opening of the twenty-first century. I argue that dramatic performance is conditioned

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not only from within the theatre, requiring an understanding of the conventional performance practices of a given culture, but also from without: the institutions of performance arise in relation to social and cultural factors, other institutions which define the categories and meanings of performance. One sign of this negotiation is the way live and mediated performance are now often implicated in one another. Much contemporary theatre work incorporates electronic media (Laurie Anderson's *Moby-Dick*, for example, or the "live" video-taping of the "live" elements of the performance in Peter Sellars's productions of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Peony Pavilion*); some "live" shows depend in other ways on mechanical reproduction (the audio-tapes and videotapes critical to Anna Deavere Smith's performances come to mind); one genre of stage performance even recreates film and television scenarios (the brilliant Zapruder sequence in Jean-Claude Van Itallie's *The Serpent*, the long-running stage version of *The Brady Bunch*, or the various reenactments – live and as internet chat – of *Star Trek* episodes). Mediatized performance enforces a negotiation with the "live" along all its borders: Anuradha Kapur, a director and professor at the National School of Drama in New Delhi – a school that provides a three-year course including training both in "classical" forms of Indian performance and in "modern" acting (Stanislavskian realism) – reports that applicants to the school are sometimes asked to perform "Michael Jackson" as an audition exercise.

Drama, dramatic performance, and the ways we understand them are constantly changing under the pressure of new technologies (indoor theatres, the printing of plays, stage lighting, the proscenium, film, digital media) and as a result of the shifting frontiers between genres of enactment, nontheatrical as well as theatrical. Shakespearean drama once shared the space of performance with bear-baiting, sermons, and jigs, as well as with other kinds of theatre, in a culture that was still dominated by oral forms of communication. Today it shares that cultural horizon with a wide range of live and mediatized enactments, modes of dramatic writing and of theatrical and nontheatrical performance that define what we think Shakespeare – or any scripted drama – can be made to do *as* performance. As the history of modern theatre attests, Shakespearean drama not only occupies the sphere of the "classic," but also has frequently provided the site for innovation in the style, substance, and practice of modern performance.

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Moreover, given their status as “literature,” Shakespeare’s plays enable us to consider an important but often misconceived aspect of dramatic performance: the function of writing, of the script, in the theatre. Shakespeare’s plays were written at the intersection of three institutions that continue to exert pressure on drama and performance. First, they were written as saleable commodities in a new mode of cultural and economic production, the emerging professional theatre. Although writing was used very differently in that theatre from how it is today, Shakespearean drama participated in the invention of a recognizably modern institution, in which playscripts are transformed into a different kind of commodity, dramatic performance. Second, Shakespeare’s plays also responded directly to a rich oral culture. Our understanding of language and knowledge have been forever altered by the impact of print; yet the Western stage remains an important site for the transformation of writing into the embodied discourses of action, movement, and speech. Finally, Shakespeare’s plays were also part of an emerging publishing industry. The fact that Shakespeare’s plays were printed not only saved them from oblivion, but also marked the beginning of a fundamental transformation in their status (and in the status of drama), from performance to print commodities.

In the West today scripted drama is identified at once through the institutions that conceive its meanings in terms of its textual form, and through the institutional practices that transform the text into something else – stage *behavior* – and that lend that behavior significance, *force* in theatrical performance. As my use of the word *force* here implies, this is the interface of the “performative,” the terrain between language and its enactment suggestively explored by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*, and more broadly remapped in cultural terms by Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, among others. The use of the “performative” in drama, theatre, and performance studies has become the focus of an important controversy about language, performance, and the performing subject. While this controversy reflects the disciplinary struggles characteristic of the humanities today, it also has important consequences for an understanding of the work of scripted drama and its performance, what we might call “dramatic performativity” – the relationship between the verbal text and the conventions (or, to use Butler’s term, “regimes”) of behavior that give it meaningful *force* as performed action. This controversy has

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three elements that I will pursue here in order to clarify dramatic performativity and the leverage it provides on an understanding of written drama and its performance: (1) how accounts of the “performative” tend to maintain a literary sense of theatrical performance; (2) how the “performative” might be refigured to model a more adequate understanding of theatrical performance; (3) how the “performative,” derived as it is from a print-inflected understanding of verbal performance, requires a careful attention not only to the practices of performance but to the divergence between the materiality of print and the ideologies of print culture.

## ANTITHEATRICAL PERFORMATIVITY

The application of J. L. Austin’s approach to speech acts, working to see the “performative” function of language mediating between texts and modes of doing, has proven to be an attractive and productive line of inquiry across the humanities, animating readings of the “performative” in literary texts (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity”), in drama and theatrical performance (Elin Diamond, “Re: Blau”), and in social performance more generally (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*). At first glance, though, the use of Austin to recuperate dramatic performance seems unpromising. The extension of Austin’s performativity has tended to rehabilitate the study of performance while reiterating a familiar antipathy toward dramatic theatre. Much as literary scholars tend to see the acts of the stage as lapsed reading, derived from the proper meanings prescribed by “the text,” Austin also has a notoriously skeptical regard for theatrical performatives. For Austin theatrical discourse is peculiarly “hollow”: “performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage” (*How to Do Things with Words* 22), insofar as theatrical utterance is part of a special class of infelicitous utterance in which the motives of the agent (“persons having certain thoughts or feelings” 15) are either insincere or are not directly embodied in subsequent conduct; literary utterance, to be fair, can also be hollow in this sense if “introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy” (22). Austin famously excludes such hollow utterance from consideration precisely because he finds it “*parasitic* upon [language’s] normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language” (22).

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Oddly enough, while Austin's cavalier dismissal of theatrical performatives – hollow to whom? in what sense? *etiolations*? – now seems to drive literary studies toward “performativity and performance,” it does so precisely by excluding a form of communication where writing bears in complex yet determinate ways on enactment: dramatic performance.

Some of the ways in which Austin is seen to liberate “performance” (and performance studies) from the tawdriness of the stage are tackled by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in their introductory essay to the influential collection *Performativity and Performance*. Parker and Sedgwick take Austin to chart a “convergence” between literary and performance studies that has pushed performativity “onto center stage” (Introduction 1): “If one consequence of this appreciation has been a heightened willingness to credit a performative dimension in all ritual, ceremonial, scripted behaviors, another would be the acknowledgment that philosophical essays themselves surely count as one such performative instance” (2). While we may be relieved that philosophers are now performers (written in the performative mode, their essays finally have force, make something happen), it is striking to think that some literary scholars have so recently recognized the force of rituals and ceremonies, a development they assign to the new antidiscipline of performance studies: “Reimagining itself over the course of the past decade as the wider field of performance studies,” theatre studies is said to have “moved well beyond the classical ontology of the black box model to embrace a myriad of performance practices, ranging from stage to festival and everything in between” (2).

This reading of Austin queers felicitous performativity, demonstrating its constitutive predication on the “etiolated” – meaning “linked with the perverted, the artificial, the unnatural, the abnormal, the decadent, the effete, the diseased” (5) – theatrical performance it excludes. Nonetheless, it is revealing that Parker and Sedgwick see the black box as a synecdoche for all theatrical performance, a space (theatre) and a critical practice (drama and theatre studies) where nothing, or very little, happens, or happens with consequence, force, as performance. Given their subsequent discussion of marriage as a form of conventional theatre, it seems evident that what Parker and Sedgwick mean by “black box model” is the spatial and performance

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dynamics of modern proscenium performance, a structure of performance that emerged barely a century ago, at the juncture of the familiar social, aesthetic, and technological pressures of Western industrial modernism that is, arguably, already on the wane as the dominant form of theatre spatiality: a darkened auditorium, a bourgeois drama, performance conventions that confine the play behind the fourth wall of a box set onstage. (In contemporary theatre, of course, a black box is a small theatre space susceptible to multiple configurations and so to various ways of shaping the relationship between stage and audience: black-box theatre does not have a proscenium.) Athens's Theatre of Dionysus, the York mystery pageants, the Globe, the illuminated Comédie Française, aquatic melodrama at Sadler's Wells, Teatro Campesino's flatbed trucks, even a thumbnail sketch of Western theatre – to say nothing of wayang kulit, Noh, or other non-Western theatricalities – throws the “black box” model, and the modern proscenium house, very much into question as a paradigm for the “classical ontology” of theatre. Ignoring theatre studies' long-standing interest in dramatic, festival, and popular performance – as well as in eras of stage production typically bypassed in literary studies, such as the nineteenth century – Parker and Sedgwick enact a typically literary disciplinary investment in textually motivated forms of modern theatre as definitive of theatrical production. Confining theatre to the black box of modern stage realism, Parker and Sedgwick take performance (and performance studies) to confirm dramatic theatre (and theatre studies) as an essentially reproductive or derivative mode of production.

Developing Jacques Derrida's reading of Austin in “Signature Event Context,” Parker and Sedgwick note that Austin's attempt to exclude theatrical discourse from ordinary performance finally predicates all performative utterance on the kind of “hollow” citationality characteristic of the stage. They deconstruct Austin's opposition between “normal” and etiolated performance, the felicitously performative and the theatrical: performative speech cannot be distinguished from the hollow utterances of the stage on the basis of originality, as though nontheatrical speaking were more authentic, less repetitive, than stage speech. Performatives can work “felicitously” only to the extent that they, like theatrical performance, are reiterable, signifying through a process of citation; utterances perform actions only when they

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iterate familiar verbal behavioral regimes. Parker's and Sedgwick's sense of the relationship between theatrical and nontheatrical performance is dramatized in their canny reexamination of Austin's reliance on marital vows ("I do") as an instance of performative speech (illocution), of "marriage itself *as* theater – marriage as a kind of fourth wall or invisible proscenium arch that moves through the world (a heterosexual couple secure in their right to hold hands in the street), continually reorienting around itself the surrounding relations of visibility and spectatorship, of the tacit and the explicit, of the possibility or impossibility of a given person's articulating a given enunciatory position" (11). They point out that the performative force of marriage is not enacted by the utterance, the text "I do," but by the ways that utterance/text, performed within the ceremony, cites and so reenacts the institutions of compulsory heterosexuality. Marriage is "like a play" (11) to the extent that it is like modern realistic theatre, a theatre whose conventional "relations of visibility and spectatorship" – as Bertolt Brecht long ago recognized – mask its ideological labor behind its claims to verisimilar representation: "Like the most conventional definition of a play" – or, more precisely, like the working of modern realistic plays in a mode of production associated with proscenium theatricality that Parker and Sedgwick take to be the "conventional definition of a play" – "marriage is constituted as a spectacle that denies its audience the ability either to look away from it or equally to intervene in it" (11).

Parker and Sedgwick brilliantly rethink the working of Austin's illocutionary "I do": the text gains its force not because the words themselves accomplish the action, but because saying "I do" in conventional rituals of wedding-theatre cites and so reproduces an entire genre of performance. That this performance – the coercive citation of heteronormativity – is epitomized as proscenium theatre typifies Parker's and Sedgwick's sense of theatre, and how they position dramatic and theatrical performance relative to performativity (and to the "wider field of performance studies"). They take the characteristic formation of modern theatre – the silent audience immobilized before the proscenium frame where all the action is (faked), removed from participation, from visibility, consuming the spectacle from their individual seats, a darkened throng of individualized subjects disciplined by/into the illusion of community – to epitomize dramatic theatre

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itself. Reducing theatre to the characteristic ideological apparatus of modern realism, Parker's and Sedgwick's stage is finally the emblem of powerful yet coercive conventionality (as, of course, much modern theatre is).

This deconstruction of Austin locates the citational "hollowness" of ordinary language performatives; paradoxically, it does not seem to render the "hollowness" peculiar to Austin's stage any more felicitous. To Parker and Sedgwick ordinary performatives signify not as words ("I do") but through their reiteration as conventional behavior, in regimes of enactment that enable the spoken words to become meaningful as performance. Theatrical performance, though, is understood in the most conventionally "literary" terms, to signify by reiterating the dramatic text, a mode of citation that renders it peculiarly hollow. Rather than understanding theatrical performance as definitive of performativity – the conventional regimes of theatrical behavior (like ideology in this sense) exceed the text, and provide the ground for its potential meaning as performance – Parker and Sedgwick follow Austin in retaining the "hollowness" of the stage by retaining the signification of dramatic performance, its force, within its "literary," textual form, the script of the play.

"When is saying something doing something? And how is saying something doing something?" (1): as Parker and Sedgwick imply, one of the problems of modeling theatrical performance on Austinian performativity is that it reduces performance to the performance of language, words, as though theatrical performance were merely, or most essentially, a mode of utterance, the (in-/felicitous) production of speech acts. Yet even the relations of visibility characteristic of an Ibsen play will be produced in performance only if we choose to stage the play in the conventional proscenium box that Ibsen imagined: as countless thrust-stage, black-box, in-the-round, and otherwise "experimental" productions have shown, the text gains different force in alternative regimes of performance. The conundrum that Parker and Sedgwick enact here has to do precisely with the fact that they, too, regard acting much as Austin does, as the straightforward citation of the dramatic text. Nontheatrical performances like the marriage ceremony exemplify the "performative" because, far from being determined by the text, the performance is understood to frame, contextualize, and determine the possible meanings the text can have as performed action, as an act with *force*. Yet this account of the marriage



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ceremony sounds much like theatre, where performance continually remakes writing into something else: it is only their “literary” desire to retain the force of the theatre within the dramatic text that prevents Parker and Sedgwick, much as it prevented Austin, from seeing this account of the “performative” as an account of dramatic performance. They, like Austin (all those examples from Shakespeare!) discount the force of theatre, including its potentially disruptive, “performative” force, because they understand stage performance merely as the citation of the playwright’s script. At the same time their discussion of the performative structure of the marital “I do” seems to beg the question: is it the dramatic text that the citational performances of the theatre cite?

## DRAMATIC PERFORMATIVITY

To consider dramatic theatre as an instance of the “performative” requires a fundamental rethinking of the function of writing in performance. Does stage performance operate citationally, less an iteration of texts than an engagement of the conventions of performance, conventions that accumulate, as Judith Butler puts it, “*the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*” (*Excitable Speech* 51)? As a citational practice, theatre – like all signifying performance – is engaged not so much in citing texts as in reiterating its own regimes of performance. Plays become meaningful in the theatre through the disciplined application of conventionalized practices – acting, directing, scenography – that transform writing into something with performative force: performance behavior. The invocation of Austin often tends to associate theatrical performance with speech, and so sees theatre’s relation to the text as akin to the ways Austin describes an utterance’s relation to language: the text grounds the potential meanings of its enactment. Yet even the act of speaking, Bruce Smith observes, is better understood as “something that happens *in* the body and *to* the body,” something apprehended “via a gestalt of *force*” (*Acoustic World* 23). Theatre goes well beyond the force of mere speech, subjecting writing to the body, to labor, to the work of production.

To pursue “dramatic performativity,” then, first requires us to retrain the deconstructive logic that Parker and Sedgwick derive from Austin and Derrida back on an understanding of drama and theatre.

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Regarding dramatic performance as having force means, paradoxically enough, that we must relinquish the notion that its force derives solely or directly from the authorial text. If stage performance merely cites its text, it remains “hollow” as behavior, even as stage behavior. It also remains derivative from, and subordinate to, fundamentally literary, print-inflected notions of theatre: theatre becomes merely a clever way to reiterate writing by other means. To see dramatic performativity as a species of the “performative” – producing action with a characteristic, if ambiguous, force – we must fashion a much more dynamic understanding of the use and function of texts in the theatre, and a more vigorous sense of the consequences of theatrical behavior as well.

Though most often invoked in literary and dramatic studies for her reading of the performative dimension of gender and sexual identifications, Judith Butler unpacks the relationship between language and enactment in ways that bear directly on this performative understanding of stage drama. It may seem surprising to turn to Butler here: Elin Diamond notes that “[p]erformance and theatre discourse are shunned by Butler” – much as they are by Parker and Sedgwick – “with a fastidiousness worthy of J. L. Austin himself” (“Re: Blau” 33). Butler is fastidious about the performative potential of the stage in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* (and even in *Antigone’s Claim*).<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, though, Butler takes hate speech, pornography, and the “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” policy of the US military toward gay personnel to locate a contemporary politics of the performative. This work traverses the zone where speaking crosses in ambiguous and contradictory ways into the sphere of doing, the zone where behavior appears to derive its force as *action* from the words it performs – a zone, in other words, much akin to the zone of dramatic performance.

Butler’s reading of the scene of speech again develops Derrida’s reading of Austin, the sense that illocutionary speech (“I do”) cannot perform as “illocution” if we understand it as a completely original, “sovereign” utterance. The conditions that make “marriage” happen are not under the sovereign control of the speakers or of their text, “I do”; for “marriage” to happen “I do” must be spoken within ceremonial and ritualized behaviors that cite and reiterate an entire range of heteronormative social institutions.<sup>2</sup> Yet in a variety of public and legal contexts, and most dramatically in the case of hate speech, we