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Excerpt

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## *Introduction: forms of remembering and forgetting in early modern England and on the Shakespearean stage*

The title engraving to Johann Philipp Abelin's second volume of his European history, the *Theatrum Europaeum* (1633), depicts early modern attitudes to the historiographical project of reconstructing the past in terms that are also at the core of this study about the drama of memory in Shakespeare's theatre. The centre of the picture is occupied by a rectangular stone table bearing the elaborate subtitle of the work: *The Continuation of Historical Chronicles or True Description of all Memorable Stories Having Occurred in Europe and other Places in the World, from the Year of Our Lord 1629 to 1633* (my translation). The engraved stone, a visual reference to the written nature of historical memory as well as to its durability, is surrounded by allegorical figures representing history, time and truth. Directly above it we see a winged stag carrying the figure of Time, a North European adaptation of Greek mythology, where the winged horse Pegasus carries the muses from Parnassus, among them Clio, the muse of historiography.<sup>1</sup> To the left, the figure of Historia as an old woman is teaching a child, her feet resting on a piece of marble inscribed 'Magistra Vitae'; on the right, the beautiful young figure of 'Lux Veritatis' is seen with a torch, bringing the light of Truth. This ensemble was a familiar topos in the iconography of early modern historiography. The title engraving to Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614), for example, features a similar pairing of History, Experience and Truth as opposed to Death and Oblivion, whose supine figures at the bottom of the picture provide the stepping-stones for a triumphant History, again addressed as 'Life's Mistress'. The engraving to Abelin's *Theatrum Europaeum* is likewise separated by a horizontal line: the lower part of the picture

<sup>1</sup> The mother of Clio was Mnemosyne, from whom the mnemonic art derives its name. Stuart Hampton-Reeves discusses depictions of Clio in early modern paintings and texts in his contribution to Cavanagh et al. (eds.), *Shakespeare's Histories and Counter-Histories*, 'Staring at Clio', pp. 1–5.

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[More information](#)

is occupied by a subterranean cave in which several figures crouch, half obscured by shadows, representing the enemies of historical truth. The sleeping female figures on the right-hand side embody oblivion, or forgetfulness.<sup>2</sup> In the middle background, cowering in the shadow, we see two half-naked, hirsute male figures in chains and with asses' ears on their heads, representing Inscitia, ignorance. An owl, the bird of wisdom, is perched – mockingly? – on a bough above them. On the left sit two female figures, also in chains, and wearing masks. The subscription identifies them as Mendacium, the lie. Their accessories, however, would invite yet another identification: they look similar to the masks that were used in ancient Greek drama. A European audience would have been familiar with such theatrical masks from medieval mystery plays or from the *commedia dell'arte* that originated in Renaissance Italy. If these masked figures recall the theatre – to its attackers nothing but an art of lying – then this raises the question of their specific relation to the figures mirroring them in the spatial arrangement of the picture, the embodiments of oblivion. The engraving implies that history and truth are opposed to forgetting and theatricality, an assumption that was often voiced also in antitheatrical tracts and as often refuted by defences of the stage, which habitually praised the theatre as a site of memory, truth and virtue.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On the early modern iconography of oblivion as a sleeping or dead figure, see William E. Engel's essay 'The decay of memory', where he discusses, among other examples, the title engraving to Raleigh's *History of the World*.

<sup>3</sup> John Northbrooke, for example, associates the theatre with forgetfulness when he writes in *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine playes or Enterluds ... Are Reproved* (1577) that playgoers 'have no mind of any reformation or amendment of [their] life' (p. 25), and Stephen Gosson's *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582) calls for plays to 'bee banished, least ... little and little we forget God' (p. 193). The definitive study of antitheatrical literature is still Jonas Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1981); the essays by Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. and Zachariah Long in C. Ivic and G. Williams (eds.), *Lethe's Legacies*, pp. 41–52 and pp. 151–64 respectively, discuss early modern attacks on the stage specifically from the perspective of forgetting. The best-known defences of the stage in terms that identify it as a medium of memory (as well as morality) can be found in Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Pennilesse* (1592), where history plays are praised for raising 'our forefathers valiant acts ... from the Graue of Oblivion', inspiring the audience to follow their model (p. 86). Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* (1612) likewise insists that plays help to form ideal, obedient subjects through teaching them England's history, a lesson directly conducive to 'exhorting them to allegiance, dehorting them from all traitorous and felonious stratagems' (p. 494). For a more detailed discussion of antitheatrical literature and the language of memory, see chapter 3 of this study.

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[More information](#)

Introduction

3



Figure 1 Johann Philipp Abelin, *Theatrum Europaeum*, title engraving to vol. II (1633)

There was a third opinion available, however, articulated not in the register of polemic but of performance, by the plays themselves. It is one of the basic assumptions of this study that the stage provides us with a more complex notion of the workings of oblivion than either its attackers or its defenders. Proceeding from the premise that all memory is formed

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[More information](#)

and transformed through acts of remembering as well as through acts of forgetting, in an ongoing process of recall and reinscription, it examines a number of Shakespeare's history plays with the aim to explore how these plays both provided and changed the subterranean structures of what would be acknowledged as history. As I will show, the relation between memory and oblivion on the early modern stage was not one of opposition but of a creative interplay – creative in the two-fold sense that this interplay is constitutive of both history and theatre. Taking the cue from Abelin's title engraving, I will highlight the proximity of theatricality and forgetting throughout in the hope of redressing a certain imbalance in scholarship toward treating the early modern stage solely in terms of memory. Only recently has critical attention been devoted to the workings of cultural forgetting, both in early modern scholarship and in memory studies. This introductory chapter will trace the 'oblivionist' turn in both fields and bring them into dialogue in order to chart the ways in which the early modern theatre can be thought of as an important site of cultural forgetting as well as of remembering.

Traditionally, the relation between memory and oblivion has been thought of as an oppositional one. This view, familiar since antiquity and rendered visually in the engraving just examined, still informs the often-quoted essay by Umberto Eco that considers the possibility of an art of forgetting only to dismiss it categorically in its very title: 'An *ars oblivionalis*? Forget it!' While he readily admits that it is possible to forget by accident, as a natural event, because of an illness or old age, to forget deliberately, let alone through use of linguistic or material signs, is utterly impossible. Eco's model can comprehend forgetting only as a negative power, as a failure of memory, as absence. It is deduced from and stands in the tradition of antique and medieval mnemonic practice which, in his view, rightly treats oblivion as a destructive force of nature, an involuntary process against which a recuperative, intentional *ars memorativa* is pitched.<sup>4</sup> Because for Eco all mnemotechniques are by definition semiotic systems, he deduces that there can be no equivalent art of forgetting: 'If the arts of memory are semiotics, it is not possible to construct an arts of forgetting on their model, because a semiotics is by definition a mechanism that presents something to the mind and therefore a mechanism for producing

<sup>4</sup> It thus carries the seeds not only of one but of two elaborate sets of mnemonic practices, the rhetorical *ars memorativa* and the ritual commemoration of

intentional acts'.<sup>5</sup> This is borne out by the founding myth of mnemotechniques as told by Cicero in *De Oratore*. The Greek poet and rhetorician Simonides of Ceos attended a symposium that was cut short by the collapse of the building in an earthquake. Only Simonides escaped and was able to identify those killed and mutilated beyond recognition by remembering exactly the order in which the participants had been seated. In this episode, the destruction of the building equals the destructive force of oblivion, while Simonides' mnemonic art restores order and identity as well as the very possibility of performing proper funeral rites.

The relation between forgetting and memory is more complicated, however, than this oppositional model of catastrophic suffering and purposeful art, of obliteration and preservation, of nature and culture suggests. In fact, theorists and practitioners of the *ars memorativa* considered oblivion not only as its enemy and a source of anxiety but as an integral part of the cognitive process: since a memory clogged with images becomes inoperable, an important part of mnemonic practice is their deletion. There was a 'deliberate or selective forgetting' at work in the memory arts, Mary Carruthers states in the preface to the second edition of her ground-breaking study of medieval mnemotechniques, *The Book of Memory*, 'a kind of forgetting that itself results from an activity of memory'.<sup>6</sup> A case in point is John Willis's *Mnemonic; or, The Art of Memory* (Lat. 1618, Engl. 1661), which figures simultaneously as rhetorical handbook and dietary regimen. Here the discussion of mnemotechniques systematically includes the 'Art of Oblivion' as an integral part of regulating the memory.<sup>7</sup> Willis differentiates between the two complementary operations of 'Reposition' and 'Deposition'. Reposition is 'the manner of charging Memory with Note-worthy things', and thus corresponds to the process of storing images in the memory. Before this can happen, however, it is necessary 'to drown all unnecessary thoughts in oblivion, that he may perfectly intend the thing he is to learn'. Not only a preparatory act, forgetting is also a part of the artful process of recollection: '*Deposition* is when we recollect things committed to memory; and having transcribed or

the dead, which both in their different ways serve to uphold social order and identity against their obliteration by death and oblivion; see Goldmann, 'Statt Totenklage Gedächtnis', 43–66, and Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, pp. 23–8.

<sup>5</sup> Eco, 'An *ars oblivionalis*?', 259.

<sup>6</sup> Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. xi.

<sup>7</sup> Willis, *Mnemonic*, p. 31.

transacted them, discharge our memories of them.' This must always happen at the earliest opportunity, lest irrelevant memories clutter and impede the brain. Willis concludes that this 'is not unlike expunging writings out of Table-Books: If therefore there be any Art of *Oblivion* (as some affirm<sup>8</sup>) it may be properly referred hither'.<sup>9</sup> In employing the traditional metaphor of the memory as a set of wax-tablets, which need to be cleared before and after something has been inscribed, Willis firmly establishes artificial forgetting as a regulative and purposeful technique integral to the art of memory.

John Willis may be better known to students of early modern mnemonic culture as the most likely English source for Robert Fludd's concept of 'memory theatres', developed in his *Utrisque Cosmi ... Historia*, which was published only one year after Willis's *Mnemonica*.<sup>10</sup> Willis had described a memory system consisting of several sets of 'theatres' or 'repositories' that are strikingly similar to the more elaborate ones that Fludd developed, which were enriched with Hermetic concepts of the microcosm to form a *theatrum orbi*. While the idea for a memory theatre probably came from Willis's text, Fludd drew on the architecture of a real theatre to establish his mnemonic locus. That theatre, as Frances Yates persuasively argued, was in all likelihood none other than the Globe theatre.<sup>11</sup> Fludd explicitly pointed out that he was employing an existing place, not a fictitious one, and the Globe theatre was the one he probably had in mind since he dedicated the first volume of his work to James I, the patron of the King's Men to whom Shakespeare belonged and whose home was the Globe. Given that Willis and Fludd employed the image of a theatre to perform acts of 'reposition', that is of recollection, it seems likely that a similar image was used to effect the kind of 'deposition' that constitutes an '*Art of Oblivion*'.

<sup>8</sup> This tantalising parenthesis simultaneously asserts and elides the existence of an *ars oblivionalis*. While there is no corresponding body of medical or philosophical literature on an art of forgetting as there is on remembering, the possibility, and indeed the necessity of a technique of forgetting has accompanied the art of memory from the start: the politician and general Themistocles, a contemporary of Simonides of Ceos who according to Cicero invented the ancient mnemotechniques, rejected Simonides' offer to teach him the art of memory and wished instead for the art of forgetting to counterbalance his naturally prodigious memory (Weinrich, *Lethe*, pp. 23–4).

<sup>9</sup> Willis, *Mnemonica*, pp. 28–30.

<sup>10</sup> See Yates, *Art of Memory*, pp. 324–6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 330–54.

Since it took only a very small step to link such imagined memory theatres with real places like the Globe theatre, this raises the urgent question whether we have to consider the stage on which Shakespeare's histories were performed as a site of not only 'reposition' but also of 'deposition', as a medium of *forgetting* as well as of remembering. From this possibility follows the equally urgent question of whether we can identify and describe the theatrical practices that would enable such acts of deposition. My study seeks to do precisely that: it analyses how both memory and oblivion were enacted in the early modern theatre through the use of stage images or, to be more precise, through the use of verbal, visual and material signs. What I am interested in is, specifically, how oblivion was both represented and enacted, not through the absence of signs but by employing signs. This necessitates a theatrical semiotics of forgetting, which I will outline in the following.

The starting point for such a semiotics of forgetting is the insight that remembering and forgetting are complementary forces rather than mutually exclusive opposites. They do not work against each other but are integral aspects of the process through which cultural memory is formed and transformed.<sup>12</sup> This entails a perspective on forgetting as a purposeful, constructive cultural act. Such a view seems to require that we distinguish for the moment between individual forgetfulness and collective forgetting, between cognitive and cultural processes. In everyday life, personal forgetfulness may indeed be largely involuntary, the result of old age, an illness, or a traumatic experience; in this sense, it is a matter for medical treatment or psychiatric therapy. Collective forgetting, on the other hand, like collective remembrance, can be deliberate, purposeful and regulated. 'Therein', explains David Lowenthal, 'lies the art of forgetting – art as opposed to ailment, choice rather than compulsion or obligation, [an] astute judgement about what to keep and what to let go, to salvage or to shred or shelve, to memorialize or anathematize'.<sup>13</sup> However, my aim is not to draw a rigid line between personal and collective memory since both are, as we will see in a moment, formed through social practices and institutions.

A second step toward a semiotics of forgetting comes with acknowledging that what is forgotten is not irretrievably gone but rather

<sup>12</sup> Krämer, 'Das Vergessen nicht vergessen!', 251–2 and 268–9.

<sup>13</sup> Lowenthal, 'Preface', p. xi.

purposefully overlooked, put aside as insignificant or as an obstacle to signification. Renate Lachmann proposes a model of culture as a semi-otic system which accommodates forgetting as a necessary process of cultural semiosis itself – not, as Eco claimed, as opposed to it.<sup>14</sup> For Lachmann, cultural memory is not a site of passive storage but rather a dynamic, continuous process of remembering and forgetting. In the economy of cultural signs and meanings, forgetting is an important instrument of regulation.<sup>15</sup> A memory which continually accumulates experiences, knowledge and meaning quickly becomes a hypertrophy of singularities; it is shaped and kept operable only by the selection of certain experiences as meaningful and the deletion of others as insignificant. In Lachmann's semiotic terminology, forgetting can be considered as a temporary designification of signs rather than their material deletion or destruction. 'Designification' means that a sign loses the semantic and pragmatic value it had while circulating within a cultural system and its institutions. In contrast to, for example, the destruction of monuments in Reformation iconoclasm, it is not the material vehicles of signs that are deleted, but their value as currency. Because this is so, the devalued sign can also be reintroduced into the circulation of culturally validated, meaningful signs. In such a process of 'resignification', vacant or disused signs are re-included in active memory and charged anew with meaning – but their new value typically differs from the meaning they had before. This difference can be seen as a form of cultural forgetting.

The relation of memory and the past is therefore not simply one of storage and retrieval but of a reconstruction of the past under conditions and constraints determined by the present. 'Remembering is basically a reconstructive process', Aleida Assmann points out: 'it always starts in the present, and so inevitably at the time when the memory is recalled, there will be shifting, distortion, revaluation, reshaping.'<sup>16</sup> And forgetting is always part of this reconstruction since, as John Frow observes, 'rather than having a meaning and a truth determined once and for all by its status as event, [the past's] meaning and its truth are constituted retroactively and repeatedly ... Data are not stored in

<sup>14</sup> Lachmann, 'Kultursemiotischer Prospekt', pp. xvii–xxvii.

<sup>15</sup> As David Lowenthal concurs: 'To forget is as essential as to keep things in mind, for no individual or collectivity can afford to remember everything. Total recall would leave us unable to discriminate or to generalize.' ('Preface', p. xi).

<sup>16</sup> Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, p. 19.



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

already constituted places but are arranged and rearranged at every point in time. Forgetting is thus an integral principle of this model, since the activity of compulsive interpretation that organizes it involves at once selection and rejection.<sup>17</sup> The concept of inclusion and exclusion, or of selection and rejection, however, is not only a matter of the cultural economy of signs, where forgetting means that some signs are not activated in communication and thus simply drop out of circulation. It also begs the urgent question of who determines what gets included and what is excluded from the realm of meaningful signs.

One possible answer to this question can be found in the work of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, especially in his concept of the social frames of memory, which he developed in *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925, published posthumously 1952). Halbwachs claims that there is no memory, be it individual or collective, which is not social. There is no clear-cut boundary between my own memories and those of others because they develop in the process of everyday interaction and within common frames of reference or significance. Even the most private memories are created and recreated in interaction with others and with shared social frames. In Halbwachs's view a society remembers of its past only what each epoch can reconstruct within its given frames of reference. These frames have the status of cultural fictions and are subject to historical change. Experiences thus become meaningful memories only insofar as they can be inserted into active frames. Forgetting can be understood as the result of a change in reference frames, in the process of which some memories become meaningless, insignificant and hence expendable. At the same time, a change in frame means that other pieces of information, knowledge or experience are included in the new set of frames and, by being reinvested with significance (resignified), become memories.<sup>18</sup>

The repeated, refracted waves of the plural 'English reformations', to borrow the title of Christopher Haigh's study, formed such a series of shifts in the frames of reference that determined what could be remembered and revered as meaningful and true. This example also makes it immediately clear that cultural frames of memory do not, as

<sup>17</sup> Frow, 'Toute la mémoire', p. 229.

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Halbwachs's frames of memory as a model for conceptualising the formation and transformation of cultural memory, see Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, ch. 6.

Halbwachs's teleological model suggests, peacefully follow one after the other, but that they constitute simultaneous, competing claims to authority and truth, claims that are sometimes staked violently. One way of describing the alteration of interpretive frames in terms of power and struggle is offered by Raymond Williams, who described the internal dynamic of the cultural process in terms of the 'emergent', 'dominant' and 'residual' features of societies.<sup>19</sup> The dominant is embodied in the majority of the society or by its ruling and most powerful class. It is not a natural given but results from an ongoing series of selections, and hence also exclusions, from the full range of human skills, practices, relationships and perceptions. Williams terms such excluded forms of knowledge as 'the residual' and 'the emergent'. The residual (in our case, the beliefs and practices of Catholicism) is usually still active in the cultural process (clandestinely observed in private or transferred, for example, to the realm of literature<sup>20</sup>), yet it is divested of its validity and authority, merely available as idealised, nostalgic memories. Often, these elements of the past are subjected to a process of, in Lachmann's words, designification and resignification so that they can be safely incorporated into the dominant culture. If a residual feature proves too oppositional, however, the dominant tries to suppress or marginalise it, another act of forgetting which in early modern England was performed, for instance, through censorship or iconoclasm. There are also emergent elements – new meanings and values, new practices, new kinds of relationship – that are being developed out of new frames of reference as societies change. In time, they may themselves eventually become incorporated into the dominant way of thinking, as was the case with the proto-Protestant ideals of the Lollards that developed from heresy in the fourteenth century to become part of the orthodox theology in the sixteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

Williams's model has the advantage of adding the question of power as well as a notion of the simultaneous plurality of cultural values to Halbwachs's, in which frames of reference too neatly succeed each other in time. Echoing the extensive body of work by Marxist criticism and discourse analysis, Renate Lachmann, too, points out that the mechanism of semiotic inclusion and exclusion is controlled by the

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *Literature and Marxism*, pp. 121–7.

<sup>20</sup> See Mazzola, *The Pathology of the English Renaissance*.

<sup>21</sup> See Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, ch. 2.