

Introduction: The authenticity of mediation

A man dressed in a simple black gown or an elaborate robe of office stands before a crowd of listeners. He speaks, and as his audience attend to his words they understand that the words are not his at all, but belong to another, absent voice. Continuing to listen, they begin to hear, through the conduit of the man's body, that other voice as though its owner were speaking. And as the absent voice materializes, it conjures a world of absent events and people, meetings of kings or street brawls among drunkards, mundane business transactions or chilling encounters with the supernatural.

In analytical terms, what takes place in this scene is the substitution of a present body and voice – that of the speaking man – for an absent voice or set of voices, resulting in a representational act that diminishes the real presence of the man's body and makes it almost less palpable than that of the voices that come to inhabit his mouth. An act of embodied mimesis results in a momentary presence effect. In historical terms, the scene depicts a transaction that took place routinely and on an everyday basis in public squares, courtrooms, assemblies of state, and theatres in Tudor and early Stuart England. The man¹ could have been Mr Fanshawe, a court clerk, speaking the words of Richard Weston, from a document in the hand of Edward Coke, at the trial of Anne Turner in 1616; he could have been Lord Keeper Nicholas Bacon, speaking the words of Elizabeth I, from a document in either the queen's or his own hand, in the House of Lords in 1563; he could have been Richard Burbage, speaking the words of Hamlet, from a document in either Thomas Vincent's or William Shakespeare's hand, at the Globe in 1600.

¹ I choose the speaker's gender here advisedly. Almost without exception, the mediator figures I study in this book were male, and in those cases I do not intend the male pronoun to be read as gender neutral. In situations where speakers, authors, or characters may have been either men or women, I use non-gender-specific language equally deliberately.

This book traces the central role such presence-generating performances played in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. It is organized around two core contentions: first, that this period did not, as scholars have suggested, witness a crisis of representation, but rather relied thoroughly on deferral, mediation, or representation as engines of authority;² and second, that the theatre established itself as the central form of cultural expression in the period precisely because it is an art profoundly dependent on similar mechanisms of embodied mediation as its basic functioning principle. It was the art form most perfectly suited for its time. My task, then, is two-fold. On the one hand, I pursue an in-depth study of cultural fields beyond the playhouses (predominantly the habits and practices of participants in criminal trials, but also the activities of historiographers, early scientists, and dabblers in magic) to establish the complex workings of a culturally pervasive if not absolutely dominant logic of mediation. On the other hand, I analyse the deep affinity between this culture and the theatre's means of creating a phantasmagorical reality. Shakespeare's plays are particularly responsive to such an analysis, not least because their theatrical self-consciousness so often finds expression on the level of the plot, and my readings here are designed to allow what might otherwise read simply as metatheatrical ornament to emerge as reflections on political, legal, or even epistemological as well as dramatic concerns.

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To flesh out these claims a little, let me begin with an example of the power of deferral and the deferral of power in action. 'We princes, I tell you, are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world duly observed. The eyes of many behold our actions.'³ Queen Elizabeth I's famous dictum was

² It has been a commonplace of critical work on early modern England that the period was marked by a cluster of crises, leading to 'a widespread sense of extreme uncertainty' and opening up 'faultlines of doubt . . . in almost every sphere of life' (David Hillman, *Shakespeare's Entrails: Belief, Skepticism, and the Interior of the Body*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007, 5). Jean-Christophe Agnew has described the theatre as 'the most vivid representation' of 'the crisis of representation' itself (*Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, 99–100; see also Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context*, University of Chicago Press, 1996). Conversely, I will argue that the theatre and other forms of social interaction that shared a logic of authorization through deferral speak to a fundamental confidence that strategies of mediation and representation could resolve crises of knowledge in a way that immediate first-hand experience and presence could not. If there was a central crisis in early modern culture, it was a crisis of presence, not of representation.

³ Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose, eds, *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, 194.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-66306-0 - Theatre and Testimony in Shakespeare's England: A Culture of Mediation

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destined to become a *locus classicus* of late twentieth-century criticism, perfectly encapsulating, as it seems to do, the theatrical strategies of Renaissance monarchies.⁴ But where was the queen when she said those words? Not in parliament, nor in any particularly public place, but in her chamber of presence at Richmond, addressing a select group of parliamentary commissioners. Her words only reached a wider audience – the kind of audience under whose scrutiny princes supposedly always labour – on ‘the Monday following’, when the speaker of the House of Commons ‘delivered’ the queen’s speech to the ‘Lower House’.⁵ Addressing her subjects through a mediator was in fact the queen’s common *modus operandi*: more frequently than not, royal speeches were performed for a small group of privileged listeners, and only subsequently reiterated, ‘delivered’, to a larger political public.⁶ Even more remarkable are occasions such as Elizabeth’s answer to the Lords’ petition urging her to marry in 1563. Despite the personal nature of the issue, her speech was given in parliament by Lord Keeper Nicholas Bacon, with Elizabeth present by his side. Although she remained silent, the manuscript of the speech is titled ‘The queen’s majesty’s answer’ – and justly, since the document is in the queen’s hand, and in the first person throughout.⁷ The Lords and Commons thus witnessed a complex orchestration of presences and representations: seeing both the monarch and her officer, hearing his voice speaking her words, grammatically adopting her person as his own persona. A similar transaction regularly took place at the opening of parliament, when it again was the common responsibility of the Lord Keeper, whom J. E. Neale calls ‘the mouth of the sovereign’,⁸ to deliver the royal speech.

More often than not, then, the queen’s *body* was not on public display, and even when it was, her *voice* may not have been. What was present were her words, sent forth through another’s mouth. That the Lord Keeper’s breath stood in for the queen’s in those moments was appropriate, given the

⁴ The *locus classicus*, which quotes Elizabeth’s *locus classicus*, is Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Oxford University Press, 1988, 64–65.

⁵ *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, 190.

⁶ On the question of how Elizabeth was represented and how she represented herself, see, among others, Susan Frye, *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation*, Oxford University Press, 1993; Christopher Haigh, *Elizabeth I*, 2nd edn, Harlow: Longman, 1998, esp. 149–69; and Mary Hill Cole, *The Portable Queen: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Ceremony*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. While I stress here the strategic displacement of the queen’s presence, she was equally capable of instrumentalizing the power of making herself visibly and audibly available, especially on progress (see Cole, *Portable Queen*, 2) and, on occasion, in parliament (see J. E. Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963, 412–15).

⁷ *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, 79–80. ⁸ Neale, *House of Commons*, 340.

nature of his position: as the custodian of the great seal, the instrument which allowed for the authorization of documents in Elizabeth's absence, he functioned officially as her stand-in. And the seal itself reproduced an image – in its wax form, a sculptural, three-dimensional image – of the royal *body*.⁹ The Lord Keeper thus traded by the nature of his office in surrogate manifestations of the royal presence.

On the much less elevated local level, similar acts of impersonation took place every time a parish priest read a royal proclamation from the pulpit: again, what was heard was a first-person utterance (as when James I speaks of 'that Right which we had to the succession of this Crowne' in a 1603 proclamation [SRP, 11]), but the author of this speech act and its speaker were clearly distinct. To understand the minister's words as a usurper's declaration would be to misinterpret them entirely. Listeners had to maintain a sharp division between the priest's voice and the king's, even as the former served as the vehicle for the latter: they had to imagine that they were hearing the king speak and at the same time had to remain aware that the speaker was not himself laying claim to that position. The transmitters of royal words needed to be constantly audible and visible precisely in order to underwrite the authenticity of their performance. The minister's credit and literacy ensured that what congregations got to hear was indeed what the printed sheet sent down from Westminster contained, even as the Lord Keeper's office guaranteed that the words he delivered were in fact authentically the queen's. Diverse forms of credit and authority were thus mobilized simultaneously in these performances.

Harold Love has discussed various types of early modern documents that 'possessed a latent authority awaiting release by utterance'.¹⁰ In the case of proclamations or royal speeches, the monarch her- or himself was that latent element. The authority released by speaking the text stemmed directly from the rendering present of the originary royal voice itself. What the queen's concern about being 'set on stages' registers, then, is not so much an anxiety about being a public *actor*, but an awareness of her existence as a *character*, constantly subject to representation as an essential part of the political process. The visual aspects of royal representation have been exhaustively analysed by historians from Frances Yates and Roy Strong to, most recently,

⁹ See Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I*, London: Pimlico, 2003 [1987], 56 and 111 for illustrations of the great seal.

¹⁰ Harold Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998, 159.

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Louis Montrose.¹¹ But I would suggest that what might have been more important than these pictorial stand-ins for the monarch were the regular *aural* impressions, or impersonations, of the queen. Her voice was reproduced over and over throughout the land, by other bodies speaking her into a virtual presence.

The logic of these transactions was theatrical in a very precise sense. They were based on scripts whose authority was in a certain sense absolute; they relied on the physical actions of bodies that were recognizably not the sovereign's own, but fantasmatically took on her person for the duration of the act; and they rendered an absent voice present and imaginatively audible. All of this is true of the early modern stage as well. There, too, the *script* was the source and locus of authority, at least state authority: the playtext, not its enactment, was 'seen and allowed' by the Master of the Revels, the official in charge of licensing plays for performances.¹² The player's body was both subject to imaginary disappearance and an abiding presence; even as Burbage brought Hamlet, Othello, or Lear to life he still remained Burbage (just as Olivier remained Olivier, and Branagh remains Branagh hundreds of years later). And on stage, too, absent or fictional characters came into being, an imaginary reality was created, through bodily acts, among which the actions of 'the larynx, the lungs, the lips, and the mouth', what Judith Butler has called 'bodily offerings',¹³ were paramount.

My point is not that Renaissance England was a stage-play world, profoundly theatrical in its social practices of 'histrionic self-presentation'.¹⁴ The theatre did not provide a *model* for the cultural patterns I have begun to describe. But it was the art form most uniquely suited to the time. As I will show, the ways in which human bodies were authorized to speak absent characters and events into being on stage and the ways in which political, judicial, testimonial, and historiographical authority was constructed in the culture at large shared a profound structural homology. In both cases, gestures of mediation or deferral go hand in hand with an ostensible insistence on presence or immanence.

¹¹ See Frances Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975; Strong, *Gloriana*; David Howarth, *Images of Rule: Art and Politics in the English Renaissance, 1485–1649*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 102–19; Louis Montrose, *The Subject of Elizabeth: Authority, Gender, and Representation*, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

¹² On theatrical censorship, see Richard Dutton, *Mastering the Revels: The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama*, London: Macmillan, 1991; and *Licensing, Censorship and Authorship in Early Modern England: Buggeswords*, London: Palgrave, 2000.

¹³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, London: Routledge, 2004, 172.

¹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, University of Chicago Press, 1980, 162.

The devolution of the monarch's role in the administration of justice provides a ready example of this principle. At least from the thirteenth century on, monarchic rule in England had been based on the delegation of authority – the king or queen ruled by dispersing personal power among state officials, issuing writs and commissions to transfer royal authority to judges, councillors, and local magistrates.¹⁵ By the early seventeenth century, Edward Coke could confidently assert that although the 'King is always present in Court in the Judgment of Law',¹⁶ he cannot himself be a judge, since that authority has been delegated to his legal officials. King's Bench – the central criminal court – might have notionally conducted its proceedings 'coram rege' ('in the presence of the king') but the presence of the king there was as much a matter of representation as Elizabeth's presence in the country churches where her proclamations were read. At the same time, that fictitious presence was of essential importance: the bench *was* the king's; criminals found themselves indicted in trials of 'Regina' or 'Rex' vs John Doe; and local magistrates were charged to keep 'the King's peace'. Legal and government officials throughout the land were imagined to speak for and in place of the monarch, and it was through their actions and speech acts that king or queen established a palpable presence in the realm. The stand-ins' bodies and voices played a crucial part in this: their authority derived from royal writs, sheets of paper or parchment, signed and sealed, but those documents and the power inherent in them could only become functional through embodiment. This nexus between surrogates and monarch, bodies and documents is nicely illustrated by the form of the crown plea rolls, the official records of cases in Queen's or King's Bench. Many of the Elizabethan plea rolls open with a large historiated letter 'P' (the first word of the roll being 'Placita', 'pleas') depicting the queen sitting in state (fig. 1). The gold of the letters next to the image ('Pl[ac]ita Cora[m] D[omi]na Regina', 'Pleas in the presence of her majesty the queen'), mirrored in the golden ornaments of rule and Elizabeth's golden dress in the illumination, links the business of the court with the office and the person of the monarch; the perspectival effect created by the tiles turns the letter into what seems to be a virtual window into the court's interior, where the royal body in its majesty guarantees the justice of proceedings. However,

¹⁵ See INT, 12–36; and cf. Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983, 440–57.

¹⁶ J. P. Kenyon, ed., *The Stuart Constitution, 1603–1688: Documents and Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, 1966, 181. Elsewhere, Coke argued that 'in the administration of justice', judges 'represent the person of our king' (quoted in Thomas G. Barnes, ed., *Somerset Assize Orders, 1629–1640*, Somerset Record Society 65, Taunton: Butler and Tanner, 1959, xx).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-66306-0 - Theatre and Testimony in Shakespeare's England: A Culture of Mediation

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Fig. 1. Court of King's [Queen's] Bench, Coram Rege Roll 13/14 Elizabeth I Michaelmas Term (1571) (TNA: PRO KB 27/1239).

Cambridge University Press

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the presence chamber that appears to lie just beneath the surface of the official record is as illusory as the presence of the queen in the actual court over which she nominally presided. What held that fiction in place on an everyday basis were the substitute bodies of the government officials, which thus formed the fulcrum of the play of presence and representation that fuelled early modern English state power.

The theatre, too, thrived on that same restless back-and-forth between presence and absence, between voice and script, actor and character, stage and imaginary world, presentation and report. But there is at least one major, important difference between theatrical and political representation: the authority of the theatre was not of the reality-making, but of the fiction-making kind. Its power was aesthetic, its goal was to entertain (or at best, to educate). Paradoxically, however, just as in the political realm the distinction between Lord Keeper and queen had to be maintained as well as effaced, and just as in the legal sphere the judgment was the king's even as the king could not judge (that is to say, just as reality-effects in the real world depended on the continued audibility of both present speaker and absent – royal – character), the theatre relied on doubleness in order to maintain its groundedness in fiction, in order to avoid collapsing into reality. If such a double vision is an inherent characteristic of the aesthetic, as Stephen Booth has argued, the political and the aesthetic shared a common logic in Shakespeare's England, even if they employed it towards opposite ends.¹⁷

This sense of theatrical doubleness almost vanishes in formulations like W. B. Worthen's assertion that the professional theatre 'consumed writing . . . to produce a theatrical commodity'.¹⁸ His metaphor implies that stagings are fuelled by scripts which disappear – are consumed – in the process, but early modern performance never fully digested its written sources. One of the aspects of theatrical double vision in the period was an abiding awareness, raised by both playwrights and players, of the scripted nature of performed plays – that the actors speak lines provided to them by someone else, in groups pre-arranged in someone else's organizational scheme, following plots laid in someone else's narrative. Much of this pre-fixed arrangement was often known (or at least knowable) to the audience in advance, in the form of familiar plot lines or readily recognizable blocking protocols, through playbills and summaries or 'arguments', or even, in the

¹⁷ See 'The Shenandoah Shakespeare Express', *SQ* 43 (1992): 479–83, 482.

¹⁸ W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 20.

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case of revivals, in the form of the text itself.¹⁹ In that sense, every performance was marked by its relationship to anterior, mostly textual ‘commodities’ – a relationship that entailed *both* the momentary suppression of those underlying sources and the issuing of recurrent reminders that they existed. Theatre explicitly derived its authority both from presence *and* from absence – it always operated partly in the realm of the virtual, was never fully authentic; or rather, its specific authenticity was an effect of a strategic inauthenticity, a deliberate failure to let the origins of voice and word coincide. In this profound reliance on a logic of deferral (the locus of authority is neither the actor’s body nor the playwright’s script, and yet both),²⁰ the theatre encapsulated the larger cultural trope of authority-through-transmission or mediation.

THE THEATRE OF DEFERRAL

The most obvious device playwrights could resort to in their efforts to keep the theatre poised on the cusp between presence and representation was metatheatricity. Moments like Shakespeare’s prologue to *Henry V*, Marston’s induction to *Antonio and Melida*, Webster’s to *The Malcontent*, or the many preludes in Jonson’s drama, from this perspective, do not serve as disruptions of the theatrical illusion, playful or otherwise, but participate in the larger theatrical project of keeping the play’s relationship with reality always asymptotical – of affirming, that is, the illusory status – and power – of the stage’s creations. These scenes thus help to reinforce, not to undermine, the theatre’s particular authority. When Jonson draws attention to the script, to the actors’ dependency on his words, to the fact that their bodies are controlled by someone else’s lines; or when Shakespeare alerts us to the inadequacy of the stage, to what cannot be seen, to that which *is not*, neither in fact detracts from the power of theatre. This is not to say the rude mechanicals’ fears in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* are well founded – they are not, but only because their lack of skill puts their production far from the danger they imagine it is courting. Shakespeare and Jonson reminded their

¹⁹ On playbills and ‘arguments’, see Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 36–80.

²⁰ This is my main conceptual disagreement with Robert Weimann’s approach to the relationship between author’s pen and player’s voice. He casts the two as bound up in an ongoing conflict or struggle for dominance, whereas I regard them as mutually authorizing, even constitutive, and as thoroughly interdependent. See Robert Weimann, *Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare’s Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, 2000; and Weimann and Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance: Stage and Page in the Elizabethan Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-66306-0 - Theatre and Testimony in Shakespeare's England: A Culture of Mediation

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audiences of the partial unreality of the show precisely in order for it to succeed – it needed to be both unreal and real to come off, although, as I will argue below, the two authors had rather different views of what such success might entail and what might be at stake if the distinction between truth and fiction were to collapse.

Here is a concrete example of this principle in action. In act 2 scene 1 of *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes catches himself losing his thread of thought mid rant:

Praise her but for this her without-door form,
Which on my faith deserves high speech, and straight
The shrug, the hum or ha, these petty brands
That calumny doth use – *O, I am out!*
That mercy does, for calumny will sear
Virtue itself; these shrugs, these hums and ha's,
When you have said she's goodly, come between
Ere you can say she's honest. (2.1.71–78, my italics)

The moment gets perilously close to scripted corpsing, to literally killing the character: *who* exactly is 'out' here, Leontes or his actor? (This is not like Coriolanus's 'Like a dull actor now / I have forgot my part, and I am out' [5.3.40–41]. It is no mere metaphor, but an enactment of being 'out'.) The reiteration of 'shrugs' and 'hums and ha's' smacks of a forgetful performer reconstructing his lines on the fly. Yet out of this momentary unhinging of the theatrical illusion, the play produces a particularly effective representation of the *character's* mental process, of Leontes's own highly constructed and yet highly confused and confusing logic; and it achieves this effect, paradoxically, by foregrounding the presence of the actor – by tricking the audience into fearing that the show might be about to grind to a halt.

But the drama's propensity to reflect on the mechanics of its own illusion-making went well beyond such deliberately forced moments of metatheatricality. Theatrical representation in general does not simply move back and forth between actorly body and authorly script; it is also almost always informed by what Marvin Carlson has called a kind of intertextual 'haunting',²¹ where the roles an actor's body has previously inhabited come to enrich and complicate his or her portrayal of subsequent characters. So strong can these associations be that they are capable of effacing, to an extent, physical realities. As Joseph Roach has shown, the great seventeenth-century actor Thomas Betterton continued to play

²¹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theater as Memory Machine*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001, esp. 52–95.