

7

Othello and Theatrical Language

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‘This’ is a powerful word in the theatre, a pointer that can indicate physical objects, subjects of discussion and stage actions. ‘This’ is a word that can conjure imaginary places on a bare stage and contain new worlds in its utterance. ‘This is Venice’ (1.1.107), we are told, and we are in Venice. ‘Here, stand behind this bulk’ (5.1.1) and we know that the stage pillar, which might have been something else in another scene, is now a shop stall. ‘Take me this work out’ (3.4.175) and we understand the speaker means to have the handkerchief in his hand copied, not the work on some other object.¹

If ‘this’ can localize objects, it can also create a space inhabited by gestures. ‘And this, and this, the greatest discords be / That e’er our hearts shall make’ (2.1.195–6) makes it clear (even without the quarto stage direction ‘they kiss’)

¹All quotations from and references to Shakespeare’s plays are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

that some sort of action is performed at these two moments, although the specifics of 'this' are made clear only in seeing the actors' gestures. Such flexibility is part of the word's strength, working as it does both to bridge language and action and to link specific moments and larger circumstances. Desdemona states, 'I have not deserved this' (4.1.236), and the audience concurs: she has not deserved being struck. But 'this' also stands in for more than the specific action. She does not deserve that, nor does she deserve the distrust and anger that lies behind the blow. Emilia tells Othello after Desdemona's death, 'This deed of thine is no more worthy heaven / Than thou wast worthy her' (5.2.167–8), and Othello's deed is, most immediately, the murder of his wife. But it is also clear from Emilia's vehement objections to the accusations of Desdemona's infidelity that 'this deed' expands to include Othello's lack of faith in his wife.

But if 'this' can clarify a story on stage, 'this' can also obfuscate it. Consider this beginning of a play: two men are alone on a bare stage, one man speaking about an event that has upset him: 'I take it much unkindly / That thou, Iago, who has had my purse / As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this' (1.1.1–3). The second speaker, Iago, protests 'If ever I did dream / Of such a matter, abhor me' (5). He goes on to describe his outrage that 'he' has not made the speaker his lieutenant, but has rather chosen 'Michael Cassio, a Florentine' (19), while Iago must be 'his Moorship's ensign' (32). After another speech in which Iago describes how he is only seeming to serve as ensign, but really is looking after his own interests, the speakers' attention returns to the upsetting matter that started the scene off: 'What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe / If he can carry't thus!' (66–7). Our first clue of what the 'it' of this 'matter' might be comes with Iago's reference to 'her father' (67) and their subsequent cries, 'Awake, what ho, Brabantio, thieves, thieves, thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags. / Thieves, thieves!' (79–81). In response to Brabantio's question, 'What is the matter there?' (83), Iago finally answers the play's

opening question: 'Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe' (88–9).

I take my time replaying these opening moments of *Othello* to remind us of how little the audience knows what is happening at the beginning of this play, particularly, as is key to my investigation, if we imagine an audience contemporary to the play's creation, one for whom the story of *Othello* has not yet become omnipresent. For such an audience – for us, if we can imagine ourselves back in that place – something is clearly afoot, and we must rely on the dialogue to begin to put the pieces together, establishing where we are and what is happening. This technique of thrusting the audience into the middle of a story is not unique to this play, of course. As *You Like It* begins with Orlando complaining feelingly to Adam of Oliver's mistreatment of him, leading almost immediately into the brothers' fight. Nor is the manner of introducing major characters through the eyes of minor ones unusual: *Antony and Cleopatra* starts with Philo's disapproving description of Antony's behaviour in Egypt.

What is striking about *Othello* is how long Shakespeare withholds crucial information about the action. Not all information is withheld, of course: we learn Iago's name within two lines of his entrance, Cassio is named the first time he is mentioned, and Brabantio's name summons him forth. It takes 30 lines before Roderigo's name is revealed, a bit of a delay, but not an important one since it is clear from his opening lines that his function is to be Iago's tool. Other context is established more generally: there is an ongoing war, the action seems to be set somewhere in Italy, and there is a Moor.

But the event that sets off Roderigo's dismay in the opening lines, the 'this' about which he is so upset that Iago didn't tell him – how long does it take to establish what 'this' is? Iago's response doesn't immediately clarify what the matter is that is upsetting Roderigo, but insists on his innocent ignorance: 'If ever I did dream of such a matter, abhor me' (5). Roderigo wavers – 'Thou told'st me thou did hold him in thy hate' (6) – and Iago's lengthy reply focuses on the proof of his hate of this

'him' rather than explicating what 'such a matter' is. Here is Iago's response in full, so we can experience what information is shared and how it is presented:

Despise me

If I do not. Three great ones of the city,
 In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
 Off-capped to him; and by the faith of man
 I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.
 But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
 Evades them with a bombast circumstance
 Horribly stuffed with epithets of war,
 Nonsuits my mediators; for 'Certes,' says he,
 'I have already chose my officer.'
 And what was he?
 Forsooth, a great arithmetician,
 One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
 A fellow almost damned in a fair wife,
 That never set a squadron in the field
 Nor the division of a battle knows
 More than a spinster – unless the bookish theoretic,
 Wherein the togaed consuls can propose
 As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice
 Is all his soldiership; but he, sir, had th'election,
 And I – of whom his eyes had seen the proof
 At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds
 Christened and heathen – must be beleed and calmed
 By debtor and creditor. This counter-caster,
 He in good time must his lieutenant be,
 And I – God bless the mark! – his Moorship's ensign.
 (1.1.7–32)

There are some odd details in this speech, even aside from the fact that it has veered away from the question of what has upset Roderigo. The first is that although Iago is very clear that he hates him, who is the object of his hatred? To whom were the great men making suit? While that question is left

dangling, we learn not only the name of Iago's rival, but his nationality and other specific details, including the tantalizing description that Cassio is 'a fellow almost damned in a fair wife', a phrase that scholars still puzzle over, given that Cassio does not appear to be married in the play. The plethora of detail lavished on Cassio's characterization spills over so that the pronouns referring to Cassio blur confusingly with those referring to the as-yet-unnamed 'he' in lines 26 and 27: 'he [clearly Cassio, given the previous context and the phrase immediately following] has th'election, / And I – of whom his eyes [his eyes? Cassio's eyes?] had seen the proof / At Rhodes, Cyprus [and wait, these can't be Cassio's eyes, given Iago's insistence that Cassio knows only the theory of warfare and has never ventured onto the battlefield; these eyes must belong to the unnamed he].' That usage of 'he' to refer to both Cassio and the unnamed man comes again in the penultimate line of the speech – 'He in good time must his lieutenant be' – and it is not until Iago's last line, and the last clause of the last line, deferred by Iago's interjection, 'God bless the mark!', that we finally get a referent for the unnamed: 'his Moorship's ensign.'

If this blurring of pronouns seems confusing, the deictics get even more muddled when Iago turns his attention to waking Brabantio. In response to Roderigo's musing, 'What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe / If he can carry't thus' (remember: what is 'it' here?), Iago proclaims:

Call up her father,
Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight,
Proclaim him in the streets; incense her kinsmen,
And, though he in a fertile climate dwell,
Plague him with flies. Though that his joy be joy,
Yet throw such chances of vexation on't
As it may lose some colour. (1.1.67–73)

'Her father' is clear enough, even though we don't know yet who the woman is, and the first three uses of 'him', and the first 'his', seem to refer to 'her father': 'Call up her father, /

Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight, / Proclaim him in the streets.' The second 'her' surely refers to the same woman – Iago wishes not only to disturb her father but her other kinsmen. So, on to the next part of the speech: 'And, though he in a fertile climate dwell, / Plague him with flies.' That 'he' and 'him' could refer back to her father, too: his delight is being poisoned, he is being plagued with flies. But does Brabantio live in a fertile climate? I suppose, yes, but does Iago worry about Brabantio's fertility? A sense that things are not quite so settled grows stronger in the next lines: 'Though that his joy be joy, / Yet throw such chances of vexation on't / As it may lose some colour.' Again, this could certainly refer to Brabantio, but it seems, especially with reference to losing colour, to invoke the Moor as well. The venom that Iago expresses seems in keeping with the hatred he has insisted he feels towards the Moor – if there is anyone that he has insisted he wanted to plague and vex, it is certainly the Moor.

Editors of the play do not find the matter settled. Norman Sanders, in the *New Cambridge Shakespeare*, flatly declares that all the pronouns in line 69 refer to Othello and then questions the rest of the passage no more.² But Ernst Honigmann, in the *Arden 3*, glosses line 68 as referring to Brabantio; though he notes that some editors think the 'him' throughout is Othello as suggested by the Folio punctuation, he rejects that on the basis that there is nothing authoritative about that punctuation.³ Michael Neill, in the *Oxford*, takes a more judicious route: 'Editors are divided as to whether the pronouns refer to Othello (as F's punctuation might suggest) or Brabantio (as Q appears to indicate). Though "rouse" might seem to anticipate the noisy wakening of Brabantio which follows, the other injunctions seem more appropriate to Othello.'⁴ The question

²*Othello*, ed. Norman Sanders, *New Cambridge Shakespeare* (updated edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.1.69n.

³*Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann, *Arden Shakespeare*, 3rd series (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 1.1.68n.

⁴*Othello, the Moor of Venice*, ed. Michael Neill, *Oxford Shakespeare*

of punctuation – the difference is primarily that of Q’s comma following ‘streete’ versus F’s period after ‘streets’ – is the sort of editorial quibble that obscures the larger play of meaning here, in which one pronoun seems to call forth two separate, yet simultaneous, referents.

Although these editorial rabbit holes might not seem connected to theatrical language, there is a purpose to this journey. My overarching theme is that it is very hard to know what is going on in these opening moments. It is not only that we do not know where deictics are pointing, but that even in moments of seeming clarity, meaning turns back in on itself. The speech that these two slippery uses of ‘he’ bracket is perhaps the best instance of this point. This is the speech in which Iago explains that his service as ensign meets his own designs, not his master’s: ‘I follow him to serve my turn upon him’ (42). But that might be the speech’s greatest moment of clarity. Compare it to the culmination of the speech:

for, sir,
 It is as sure as you are Roderigo,
 Were I the Moor I would not be Iago.
 In following him I follow but myself.
 Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
 But seeming so for my peculiar end.
 For when my outward action doth demonstrate
 The native act and figure of my heart
 In compliment extern, ’tis not long after
 But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
 For daws to peck at. I am not what I am. (1.1.55–65)

Here, even when the referents seem to be the most spelled out, they circle back in on themselves. ‘Were I the Moor I would not be Iago.’ ‘I am not what I am.’ What does an audience learn from this, other than to not be sure about trusting Iago,

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 201.

even as he seems to be the only one who has any information to share?

I first began to be bothered by the opacity of the play's opening when I noticed how long it takes for anyone to use Othello's name. He is referred to, in order of usage, as 'he' (1.1.12), 'his Moorship' (32), 'the Moor' (39, 57, 118, 127, 148, 165, 178), 'the thick-lips' (66), 'an old black ram' (88), 'the devil' (91), 'a Barbary horse' (113), 'an extravagant and wheeling stranger' (137) – but never is he named in the first scene. In the second scene, he finally appears on the stage, but again is not named. It is not until the Duke greets him in the third scene as 'Valiant Othello' (1.3.48) that anyone uses his proper name. This deferral of his name, combined with his absence from the stage for the first 230 lines of the play, leaves the audience with little way to refer to him other than by using Iago's racially loaded terms. It is not only Iago who cannot think of Othello outside of these epithets, but the audience as well, who has only Iago's evocative language to go by.

My point is not only that Iago is the audience's entry into the world of the play, but that the nature of the play's theatrical language normalizes the audience's dependence on Iago's viewpoint. In a theatre without extensive scenery or playbills, for a recent play that has not yet entered the canon of our memory, the audience relies on a play's dialogue in order to establish its *mise-en-scène*. The funeral procession at the start of *1 Henry VI*, described as mourning 'King Henry the Fifth, too famous to live long' (1.1.6), establishes the time and location of that play. The beginning of a play might not always locate the story as clearly in terms of geography or chronology: 'In sooth, I know not why I am so sad' (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1.1.1) – but in this case it sets Antonio's mood and his subsequent relationship with Bassanio that drives the plot. But *Othello* begins with the unclear 'this'; and its opening lines, with their emphasis on unspecified events and repetition of indeterminate pronouns, mystify rather than clarify. It is a deliberate strategy of obfuscation and it

is successful because the audience does not have the tools to supply the information withheld.

The absence of Othello's proper name and the shiftiness of pronouns are only some of the ways in which the audience is left to fend for themselves in this play. Consider, again, the matter that so troubles Roderigo. Initially we do not know what it is. Then we gather that, as Iago tries to convince Brabantio, it is that the Moor has stolen his daughter. Brabantio, in turn, proposes a slight modification to this story: the Moor has enchanted her. It is not until many lines later, more than 300 lines later, that the counter-narrative of a mutual elopement is presented, with Othello and Desdemona falling in love over tales from his 'traveller's history' (1.3.138). Given the length of time in which Iago's presentation dominates in the absence of any other narrative, how easily is it displaced? How does the audience decide to shift from one narrative to another? Do they make that shift, or do both stories exist, a single event pointing in two different directions at the same time?

In experiencing this shift, the audience's position mirrors that of Othello's in the course of Iago's trickery. Which story do we believe? What can we know when we're not sure whether we can trust what our eyes and ears tell us? Nothing is stable in this play, from Iago's 'I am not what I am' to the dual time scheme of the story (does the action in the play happen over a few days or many months?).⁵ If *Othello* is a play about searching for ocular proof, it is also a play that achieves its proof, and undermines it, through the theatrical techniques of descriptions of offstage action and the heightened significance of props. But while the audience is not duped to the same degree as Othello – we know what Cassio and Iago are discussing when Othello is spying on them, we know how Cassio got hold of the handkerchief – the audience

⁵Honigmann's introduction to his edition provides a concise overview of the critical debates about the time scheme of the play's action (68–72). Even the play's textual history and the differences between the quarto and folio versions adds to the play's instability.

is also kept from understanding other key mysteries of the play, including insight into Iago's hatred. The obfuscation of the opening scenes and the theme of not knowing what to believe carry over the rest of the play. *Othello* is successful in destabilizing the audience because it successfully manipulates early modern theatrical conventions. Theatrical practice is a nuanced language that can be turned to the playwright's devices just as well as English can.

Brabantio's insistence, when he confronts Othello, that he already knows that she was enchanted, is key here:

Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,
 For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
 If she in chains of magic were not bound,
 Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy,
 So opposite to marriage that she shunned
 The wealthy curlèd darlings of our nation,
 Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,
 Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
 Of such a thing as thou – to fear, not to delight.
 Judge me the world if 'tis not gross in sense
 That thou hast practised on her with foul charms,
 Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals
 That weakens motion. I'll have't disputed on.
 'Tis probable, and palpable to thinking. (1.2.64–77)

'Tis probable, and palpable to thinking.' It is clear enough from Brabantio's perspective why his explanation is probable – it fits in with his conception both of Desdemona (so tender even curlèd darlings weren't good enough for her propriety) and his notion of Othello. But what makes this palpable to thinking? It is a phrase that, in contrast to the problematic 'he's, does not get glossed in most editions. And certainly the sense of it as meaning 'obvious to thought' is clear enough. But palpable does not only mean 'obvious.' Its primary sense is, as John Bullokar's 1616 *An English Expositor* puts it, 'That which may bee felt with the fingers: manifest,

notorious.⁶ Brabantio's emphasis throughout this speech on sense – 'I'll refer me to all things of sense', 'Judge me the world if 'tis not gross in sense' – keeps the double meaning of sense and palpable at the forefront: he might be asking about what can be judged, but he is always doing so in terms of our senses, what can be seen and felt.

'Tis probable, and palpable to thinking.' Does not theatre make things palpable? Is it not the work of players to take written words and attach them to moving, feeling bodies? And isn't that work done in conjunction with an audience, who must judge whether to see character or personator, who must decide what is probable? A player who is not probable in his role, who is only visible as an actor rather than as part of the story, is usually failing as a player. Describing theatre as palpable has its own pitfalls. Audiences do not, generally, reach out and touch the players. It of course is not Henry V on stage, nor should it be (that's not theatre; that's celebrity). But theatre does turn thought and words into visible and audible presences, into something that can be seen and heard and could, potentially, be felt. It is one of the few art forms that brings living artists into the same physical space at the same time as their audience.

If one of the pitfalls of thinking of theatre as palpable is that you do not actually reach out and palpate it, another is that, in this play, what is palpable to thinking is exactly wrong. Brabantio assumes incorrectly that Othello has enchanted Desdemona; Othello assumes incorrectly that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. It seems that what is palpable to thinking are our own worst thoughts, our prejudices and fears. So is *Othello* a play that is fundamentally antitheatrical? A play that teaches us not to trust theatre?

I think, rather, the reverse is true. *Othello* is a play that investigates the problem that all people face – how to judge

⁶John Bullokar, *An English Expositor Teaching the Interpretation of the Hardest Words Vsed in Our Language. With Sundry Explications, Descriptions, and Discourses* (London: John Legatt, 1616), sig. L6v.

people, how to trust a story, how to know when something is or is not true. It is able to investigate that truth in the theatre precisely because it is theatrical language that allows us to look at the question. Just as the opening of the play succeeds because it draws on theatrical language to heighten the audience's disorientation and then uses that disorientation to align them with Othello's disorientation in the play, so the question of what is palpable to thinking is central both to theatrical language and to the play's urgency. To emphasize what is palpable to thinking puts the audience's and Othello's disorientation in terms of theatrical performance that then must resolve those paradoxes. By the end of the play, the obfuscating 'this' becomes the dramatic 'this' that carries the story forward. 'Set you down this' (5.2.360) asks Othello of his witnesses, just before he points out 'No way but this: / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss' (368–9). 'This is thy work' (374) Lodovico tells Iago and then takes on the burden of the play, 'This heavy act with heavy heart relate' (381).

The importance of thinking about *Othello* in terms of its theatrical language lies not in how it enables us to understand new aspects of the play, but in what it suggests for how scholars should understand early modern drama. If we are no longer in danger of understanding the plays too much in terms of real life, reading the characters as people rather than as roles, current critical habits are too inclined to study the plays in terms of historicity – reading through the lens of historical difference, linking the language and politics of plays to pamphlets, or colonialism, or an emerging rhetoric of science. With the exception of the work of performance scholars – those of us who take performance as the focus of our inquiries and therefore who read the plays in terms of theatre and other performance media – very little scholarship on Shakespeare thinks of the plays in terms of theatrical performance. There might be discussion of how geography is connected to the humors, an analysis of the connections between sleep and political discourse, or a teasing out of the resonances of animal imagery. But if that scholarship is

drawing on Shakespeare's plays, then where is the recognition that the staging of those texts might somehow be involved in shaping their meanings? Is the effect of describing humours on stage the same as reading a description of those humours in a receipt book?

I do not want to reopen those tiresome debates about whether the plays can only be understood through performance, a point of view that denies the long history of the plays as texts that were and are read and that sees all performance as the same, as if how it is staged today reveals how it was experienced then.⁷ I am not arguing that we can only understand the plays through performance; nor am I insisting that Lukas Erne's promotion of Shakespeare as a literary dramatist is leading us down a path of peril.⁸ But it is important to remember that there are stages there and that those stages were not just platforms on which the players strode, but a way of making meaning, a language.

There are some significant challenges to working this way, not least the fact that it is hard to separate what we might know about early modern theatres from what we imagine we know from our own experiences. After the first wave of optimistic and joyful insistence that we could rediscover Shakespeare's real meaning through performing him, came a second wave of caution, one correctly pointing out that the nature of performance changes as its material conditions and producing cultures change. We ought not go back to assuming that our theatrical habits can be merely transferred wholesale onto Shakespeare. But it is not impossible to see traces of earlier theatrical languages. Andrew James Hartley recently

⁷For a brief overview of the history of performance scholarship and Shakespeare, see my introduction to *New Directions in Renaissance Drama and Performance Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1–11.

⁸See Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); for a critique, see W. B. Worthen, 'Intoxicating Rhythms: Or, Shakespeare, Literary Drama, and Performance (Studies)', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62 (2011): 309–39.

argued that even as many aspects of performance have changed over the centuries, enough is constant that modern performances might in fact teach us something: there are still actors and audiences and they still work together to create a character out of the written role.⁹ Carolyn Sale connects the wrestling with written language and alphabets she sees in *Titus Andronicus* with Shakespeare's wrestling to create a new theatrical language.¹⁰ Those are just two quick examples of how some scholars have found ways of thinking about theatrical practices even as they might not know the full scope of how drama was realized on early modern stages. But it is clear that there are rich possibilities in thinking about plays in terms of how theatre makes meaning.

In thinking of theatrical practice as a language, I am arguing that all scholars – not only performance scholars – need to push past the recognition that Shakespeare's plays were informed by early modern staging practices to an understanding of the constitutive power of those stagings.¹¹ Theatrical practice does not merely provide the platform from which his plays speak; theatrical practice is the language through which the plays speak and with which they make meaning.

When Iago asserts 'I am not what I am', he is telling us something more true than the obvious statement that his schemes run deeper than his surface actions. No matter what

⁹Andrew James Hartley, 'Page and Stage Again: Rethinking Renaissance Character Phenomenologically', in *New Directions in Renaissance Drama and Performance Studies*, 77–93.

¹⁰Carolyn Sale, 'Black Aeneas: Race, English Literary History, and the "Barbarous" Poetics of *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62 (2011): 25–52.

¹¹There is a long history of thinking of theatre through semiotics; see, for example, Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theater and Drama* (London; New York: Methuen, 1980); and Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theater*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983). I am less interested in theatrical semiotics than I am in seeing theatrical languages as relevant to literary study.

else might be true about Iago, he is not who he is: he is not a man named Iago, but an actor playing a character named Iago. The work of theatre is to make things other than they are: a man represents a character, a wall stands in for a castle, a pair of chairs and a table become a tavern. The audience knows what these things are because we accept the terms of the fiction. The man tells us he's waiting for his lover and it's cold outside; he gestures at the wall and wishes she would emerge from the castle; they sit at the table and hold tankards in their hands and we understand that the wall behind them is no longer the castle but a tavern. These things are obvious enough to us that the inability of others to follow those rules is a source of laughter – think of the mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the grocers in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. They are also a source of tragedy – Romeo cannot perceive the difference between Juliet asleep and Juliet dead, the Duchess of Malfi mistakes the artificial figures of her family as their corpses.

But what if the terms of the fiction are lying to us? What if all the women on stage are played by boys because female characters are always played by boys, but one character is revealed to be played by a boy because the character is actually a boy? What if a play teases its audience with knowledge of a precipitating event that it refuses to share and then reveals that event only through competing stories even as it tells us not to trust reports of news? How does the audience know what to make of what's happening on stage? This is what makes *Othello* such a powerful play. The lack of clarity about what is happening, our inability to decide what is probable – the struggles the characters face in the play are mirrored in the struggles the audience faces in watching the play.

This examination of *Othello* and call for reading the plays with an awareness of theatrical language has been grounded in the practices of the early modern theatre. But the recognition that theatrical practice is a constitutive language holds true for any performance, not only early modern ones. Today we are generally so habituated to mainstream theatre that we do

not dwell on its conventions. It is the unusual practices that catch our eye and make us look at theatre anew. Performance scholars have used the multi-media and multiply layered Shakespeare performances of The Wooster Group to explore how acting techniques and mediation shape the story they are telling with *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*.¹² The five hours of the Toneelgroep's *Roman Tragedies*, with its projections and microphones and onstage audience, is another out-of-the-ordinary production the theatrical language of which prompts scholars to consider its impact on how the performance's meaning is created.¹³ But even the usual theatrical language is also constitutive, enabling and disabling meanings, as the work of W. B. Worthen, Barbara Hodgdon and others have shown.¹⁴

The specialization of fields within the larger body of Shakespeare scholarship has meant that performance scholars, theatre historians and literary scholars have too often talked within their own circles, as if they have nothing to offer each other. But Shakespeare's works and Shakespeare's reception do not exist within silos. We need to think of Shakespeare's plays not as literary vehicles or as theatrical ones, but as works that draw on multiple languages to create their rich play of meanings.

¹²For more on their production of *Hamlet*, see Sarah Werner, 'Two *Hamlets*: Wooster Group and Synthetic Theater', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59 (2008): 323–9; W. B. Worthen, 'Hamlet at Ground Zero: The Wooster Group and the Archive of Performance', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59 (2008): 303–22; and William N. West, 'Replaying Early Modern Performances', in *New Directions in Renaissance Drama and Performance Studies*, 30–50. For *Troilus and Cressida*, see Thomas P. Cartelli, "'The Killing Stops Here": Unmaking the Myths of Troy in the Wooster Group / RSC *Troilus & Cressida* (2012)', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64 (2013): 233–43.

¹³See Christian M. Billing, 'The Roman Tragedies', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61 (2010): 415–39; and Sarah Werner, 'Audiences', in *Shakespeare and the Making of Theatre*, ed. Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Bridget Escolme (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 165–79.

¹⁴See, for example, W. B. Worthen, *Drama: Between Poetry and Performance* (Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); and Barbara Hodgdon, 'Introduction', *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 1–9.