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# SHAKESPEAREAN NEGOTIATIONS

*The Circulation of  
Social Energy in  
Renaissance England*

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## The Circulation of Social Energy

I began with the desire to speak with the dead.

This desire is a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies, a motive organized, professionalized, buried beneath thick layers of bureaucratic decorum: literature professors are salaried, middle-class shamans. If I never believed that the dead could hear me, and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could re-create a conversation with them. Even when I came to understand that in my most intense moments of straining to listen all I could hear was my own voice, even then I did not abandon my desire. It was true that I could hear only my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living. Many of the traces have little resonance, though every one, even the most trivial or tedious, contains some fragment of lost life; others seem uncannily full of the will to be heard. It is paradoxical, of course, to seek the living will of the dead in fictions, in places where there was no live bodily being to begin with. But those who love literature tend to find more intensity in simulations—in the formal, self-conscious miming of life—than in any of the other textual traces left by the dead, for simulations are undertaken in full awareness of the absence of the life they contrive to represent, and hence they may skillfully anticipate and compensate for the vanishing of the actual life that has empowered them. Conventional in my tastes, I found the most satisfying intensity of all in Shakespeare.

I wanted to know how Shakespeare managed to achieve such intensity, for I thought that the more I understood this achievement, the more I could hear and understand the speech of the dead.

The question then was how did so much life get into the textual traces? Shakespeare's plays, it seemed, had precipitated out of a sublime confrontation between a total artist and a totalizing society. By a total artist I mean one who, through training, resourcefulness, and talent, is at the moment of creation complete unto himself; by a totalizing society I mean one that posits an occult network linking all human, natural, and cosmic powers and that claims on behalf of its ruling elite a privileged place in this network. Such a society generates vivid dreams of access to the linked powers and vests control of this access in a religious and state bureaucracy at whose pinnacle is the symbolic figure of the monarch. The result of this confrontation between total artist and totalizing society was a set of unique, inexhaustible, and supremely powerful works of art.

In the book I have written something of this initial conception survives, but it has been complicated by several turns in my thinking that I had not foreseen. I can summarize those turns by remarking that I came to have doubts about two things: "total artist" and "totalizing society."

I did not, to be sure, doubt that the plays attributed to Shakespeare were in large part written by the supremely gifted alumnus of the Stratford grammar school. Nor did I cease to believe that Renaissance society was totalizing in intention. But I grew increasingly uneasy with the monolithic entities that my work had posited. No individual, not even the most brilliant, seemed complete unto himself—my own study of Renaissance self-fashioning had already persuaded me of this—and Elizabethan and Jacobean visions of hidden unity seemed like anxious rhetorical attempts to conceal cracks, conflict, and disarray. I had tried to organize the mixed motives of Tudor and Stuart culture under the rubric *power*, but that term implied a structural unity and stability of command belied by much of what I actually knew about the exercise of authority and force in the period.

If it was important to speak of power in relation to Renaissance literature—not only as the object but as the enabling condition of representation itself—it was equally important to resist the integra-

tion of all images and expressions into a single master discourse. For if Renaissance writers themselves often echoed the desire of princes and prelates for just such a discourse, brilliant critical and theoretical work in recent years by a large and diverse group of scholars had demonstrated that this desire was itself constructed out of conflicting and ill-sorted motives. Even those literary texts that sought most ardently to speak for a monolithic power could be shown to be the sites of institutional and ideological contestation.

But what does it mean to pull back from a notion of artistic completeness, on the one hand, and totalizing power, on the other? It can mean a return to the text itself as the central object of our attention. To speak of such a return has a salutary ring—there are days when I long to recover the close-grained formalism of my own literary training—but the referent of the phrase "the text itself" is by no means clear. Indeed in the case of Shakespeare (and of the drama more generally), there has probably never been a time since the early eighteenth century when there was less confidence in the "text." Not only has a new generation of textual historians undermined the notion that a skilled editorial weaving of folio and quarto readings will give us an authentic record of Shakespeare's original intentions, but theater historians have challenged the whole notion of the text as the central, stable locus of theatrical meaning. There are textual traces—a bewildering mass of them—but it is impossible to take the "text itself" as the perfect, unsubstitutable, freestanding container of all of its meanings.

The textual analyses I was trained to do had as their goal the identification and celebration of a numinous literary authority, whether that authority was ultimately located in the mysterious genius of an artist or in the mysterious perfection of a text whose intuitions and concepts can never be expressed in other terms.<sup>1</sup> The great attraction of this authority is that it appears to bind and fix the energies we prize, to identify a stable and permanent source of literary power, to offer an escape from shared contingency.

This project, endlessly repeated, repeatedly fails for one reason: there is no escape from contingency.

All the same, we do experience unmistakable pleasure and interest in the literary traces of the dead, and I return to the question how it is possible for those traces to convey lost life. Over the past several generations this question has been addressed principally by

close reading of the textual traces, and I believe that sustained, scrupulous attention to formal and linguistic design will remain at the center of literary teaching and study. But in the essays that follow I propose something different: to look less at the presumed center of the literary domain than at its borders, to try to track what can only be glimpsed, as it were, at the margins of the text. The cost of this shift in attention will be the satisfying illusion of a "whole reading," the impression conveyed by powerful critics that had they but world enough and time, they could illuminate every corner of the text and knit together into a unified interpretive vision all of their discrete perceptions. My vision is necessarily more fragmentary, but I hope to offer a compensatory satisfaction: insight into the half-hidden cultural transactions through which great works of art are empowered.

I propose that we begin by taking seriously the collective production of literary pleasure and interest. We know that this production is collective since language itself, which is at the heart of literary power, is the supreme instance of a collective creation. But this knowledge has for the most part remained inert, either cordoned off in prefatory acknowledgments or diffused in textual analyses that convey almost nothing of the social dimension of literature's power. Instead the work seems to stand only for the skill and effort of the individual artist, as if whole cultures possessed their shared emotions, stories, and dreams only because a professional caste invented them and parceled them out. In literary criticism Renaissance artists function like Renaissance monarchs: at some level we know perfectly well that the power of the prince is largely a collective invention, the symbolic embodiment of the desire, pleasure, and violence of thousands of subjects, the instrumental expression of complex networks of dependency and fear, the agent rather than the maker of the social will. Yet we can scarcely write of prince or poet without accepting the fiction that power directly emanates from him and that society draws upon this power.<sup>2</sup>

The attempt to locate the power of art in a permanently novel, untranslatable formal perfection will always end in a blind alley, but the frustration is particularly intense in the study of the Shakespearean theater for two reasons. First, the theater is manifestly the product of collective intentions. There may be a moment in which a solitary individual puts words on a page, but it is by no means clear

that this moment is the heart of the mystery and that everything else is to be stripped away and discarded. Moreover, the moment of inscription, on closer analysis, is itself a social moment. This is particularly clear with Shakespeare, who does not conceal his indebtedness to literary sources, but it is also true for less obviously collaborative authors, all of whom depend upon collective genres, narrative patterns, and linguistic conventions.<sup>3</sup> Second, the theater manifestly addresses its audience as a collectivity. The model is not, as with the nineteenth-century novel, the individual reader who withdraws from the public world of affairs to the privacy of the hearth but the crowd that gathers together in a public play space.<sup>4</sup> The Shakespearean theater depends upon a felt community: there is no dimming of lights, no attempt to isolate and awaken the sensibilities of each individual member of the audience, no sense of the disappearance of the crowd.

If the textual traces in which we take interest and pleasure are not sources of numinous authority, if they are the signs of contingent social practices, then the questions we ask of them cannot profitably center on a search for their untranslatable essence. Instead we can ask how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic form, offered for consumption. We can examine how the boundaries were marked between cultural practices understood to be art forms and other, contiguous, forms of expression. We can attempt to determine how these specially demarcated zones were invested with the power to confer pleasure or excite interest or generate anxiety. The idea is not to strip away and discard the enchanted impression of aesthetic autonomy but to inquire into the objective conditions of this enchantment, to discover how the traces of social circulation are effaced.

I have termed this general enterprise—study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices—a poetics of culture. For me the inquiry is bound up with a specific interest in Renaissance modes of aesthetic empowerment: I want to know how cultural objects, expressions, and practices—here, principally, plays by Shakespeare and the stage on which they first appeared—acquired compelling force. English literary theorists in the period needed a new word for that force, a word to describe the ability of language, in Puttenham's

phrase, to cause "a stir to the mind"; drawing on the Greek rhetorical tradition, they called it *energia*.<sup>5</sup> This is the origin in our language of the term "energy," a term I propose we use, provided we understand that its origins lie in rhetoric rather than physics and that its significance is social and historical. We experience that energy within ourselves, but its contemporary existence depends upon an irregular chain of historical transactions that leads back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> Does this mean that the aesthetic power of a play like *King Lear* is a direct transmission from Shakespeare's time to our own? Certainly not. That play and the circumstances in which it was originally embedded have been continuously, often radically, refigured. But these refigurations do not cancel history, locking us into a perpetual present; on the contrary, they are signs of the inescapability of a historical process, a structured negotiation and exchange, already evident in the initial moments of empowerment. That there is no direct, unmediated link between ourselves and Shakespeare's plays does not mean that there is no link at all. The "life" that literary works seem to possess long after both the death of the author and the death of the culture for which the author wrote is the historical consequence, however transformed and refashioned, of the social energy initially encoded in those works.

But what is "social energy"? The term implies something measurable, yet I cannot provide a convenient and reliable formula for isolating a single, stable quantum for examination. We identify *energia* only indirectly, by its effects: it is manifested in the capacity of certain verbal, aural, and visual traces to produce, shape, and organize collective physical and mental experiences. Hence it is associated with repeatable forms of pleasure and interest, with the capacity to arouse disquiet, pain, fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder. In its aesthetic modes, social energy must have a minimal predictability—enough to make simple repetitions possible—and a minimal range: enough to reach out beyond a single creator or consumer to some community, however constricted. Occasionally, and we are generally interested in these occasions, the predictability and range will be far greater: large numbers of men and women of different social classes and divergent beliefs will be induced to explode with laughter or weep or experience a complex blend of anxiety and exaltation. Moreover,

the aesthetic forms of social energy are usually characterized by a minimal adaptability—enough to enable them to survive at least some of the constant changes in social circumstance and cultural value that make ordinary utterances evanescent. Whereas most collective expressions moved from their original setting to a new place or time are dead on arrival, the social energy encoded in certain works of art continues to generate the illusion of life for centuries. I want to understand the negotiations through which works of art obtain and amplify such powerful energy.

If one longs, as I do, to reconstruct these negotiations, one dreams of finding an originary moment, a moment in which the master hand shapes the concentrated social energy into the sublime aesthetic object. But the quest is fruitless, for there is no originary moment, no pure act of untrammelled creation. In place of a blazing genesis, one begins to glimpse something that seems at first far less spectacular: a subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a negotiation between joint-stock companies. Gradually, these complex, ceaseless borrowings and lendings have come to seem to me more important, more poignant even, than the epiphany for which I had hoped.

The textual traces that have survived from the Renaissance and that are at the center of our literary interest in Shakespeare are the products of extended borrowings, collective exchanges, and mutual enchantments. They were made by moving certain things—principally ordinary language but also metaphors, ceremonies, dances, emblems, items of clothing, well-worn stories, and so forth—from one culturally demarcated zone to another. We need to understand not only the construction of these zones but also the process of movement across the shifting boundaries between them. Who decides which materials can be moved and which must remain in place? How are cultural materials prepared for exchange? What happens to them when they are moved?

But why are we obliged to speak of movement at all? Except in the most material instances—items of clothing, stage properties, the bodies of actors—nothing is literally moved onto the stage. Rather, the theater achieves its representations by gesture and language, that is, by signifiers that seem to leave the signifieds completely untouched. Renaissance writers would seem to have en-

dorsed this intangibility by returning again and again to the image of the mirror; the purpose of playing, in Hamlet's conventional words, is "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.21-24). The mirror is the emblem of instantaneous and accurate reproduction; it takes nothing from what it reflects and adds nothing except self-knowledge.

Perhaps this is what the players actually thought they were doing, but it is worth considering how convenient and self-protective the image of the mirror must have seemed. Artists in a time of censorship and repression had ample reason to claim that they had taken nothing from the world they represented, that they had never dreamed of violating the distance demanded by their superiors, that their representations only reflected faithfully the world's own form. Yet even in Hamlet's familiar account, the word *pressure*—that is, impression, as with a seal or signet ring—should signal to us that for the Renaissance more is at stake in mirrors than an abstract and bodiless reflection. Both optics and mirror lore in the period suggested that something was actively passing back and forth in the production of mirror images, that accurate representation depended upon material emanation and exchange.<sup>7</sup> Only if we reinvest the mirror image with a sense of pressure as well as form can it convey something of its original strangeness and magic. And only with the recovery of this strangeness can we glimpse a whole spectrum of representational exchanges where we had once seen simple reflection alone. In some exchanges the object or practice mimed onstage seems relatively untouched by the representation; in others, the object or practice is intensified, diminished, or even completely evacuated by its encounter with the theater; in still others, it is marked as a prize—something "up for grabs"—in an unresolved struggle between competing representational discourses. The mistake is to imagine that there is a single, fixed, mode of exchange; in reality, there are many modes, their character is determined historically, and they are continually renegotiated.

The range of these modes is treated in detail in the chapters that follow, but it might be useful to note some of the more common types:

1. *Appropriation.* There seems to be little or no payment or reciprocal understanding or quid pro quo. Objects appear to be in the public domain, hence in the category of "things indifferent" (adiaphora): there for the taking. Or, alternatively, objects appear to be vulnerable and defenseless, hence graspable without punishment or retaliation.

The prime example of adiaphora is ordinary language: for literary art this is the single greatest cultural creation that may be appropriated without payment. One of the simplest and most sublime instances is Lear's anguished "Never, never, never, never, never." But once we pass beyond the most conventional and familiar expressions, we come upon instances of language use that are charged with potential dangers, powerful social charms that cannot be simply appropriated. And under certain circumstances even ordinary language may be surprisingly contested.

The prime example of the vulnerable is the lower classes, who may at most times be represented almost without restraint.

2. *Purchase.* Here something, most often money, is paid by the theater company for an object (or practice or story) that is staged. The clearest instances are properties and costumes. The inventories that have survived suggest that theater companies were prepared to pay a high price for objects with a high symbolic valence: "Item, 1 popes miter"; "Item, 3 Imperial crowns; 1 plain crown"; "Bought a doublet of white satin laid thick with gold lace, and pair of round paned hose of cloth of silver, the panes laid with gold lace . . . £7.00."<sup>8</sup> Some of the costumes were made directly for the players; others came via transactions that reveal the circuitous channels through which social energy could be circulated: suits were given by gentlemen to their servants in lieu of cash payment (or in addition to such payment); the servants sold the clothes to the players; the players appeared onstage in clothes that might actually have belonged to members of the audience.

The companies did not pay for "rights" to stories, so far as I know—at least not in the modern sense—but the playwright or company did pay for the books used as sources (for example, Holinshed or Marguerite of Navarre or Giraldi Cinthio), and the playwright himself was paid.

3. *Symbolic Acquisition*. Here a social practice or other mode of social energy is transferred to the stage by means of representation. No cash payment is made, but the object acquired is not in the realm of things indifferent, and something is implicitly or explicitly given in return for it. The transferring agency has its purposes, which may be more or less overt; the theater picks up what it can get and gives in return what it must (for example, public celebration or humiliation). In chapter 4 I discuss the way the charismatic religious practice of exorcism, under attack by the official church, is brought on to the stage, where its power is at once exploited and marked out as a fraud: "Five fiends have been in poor Tom at once: of lust, as Obidicut; Hobbididence, prince of dumbness; Mahu, of stealing; Modo, of murder; Flibbertigibbet, of mopping and mowing, who since possesses chambermaids and waiting-women."

We can further distinguish three types of symbolic acquisition:

a. *Acquisition through Simulation*. The actor simulates what is already understood to be a theatrical representation. The most extreme instance is the theater's own self-representations—that is, simulations of actors performing plays, as in *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet*, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, or *The Roman Actor*—but many of the most resonant instances involve more complex simulations of the histrionic elements in public ceremonials and rituals. For example, as I shall show in chapter 5, the spectacular royal pardons that were understood by observers to be theatrical occasions were staged as theatrical occasions in plays such as *Measure for Measure*.

b. *Metaphorical Acquisition*. Here a practice (or a set of social energies) is acquired indirectly. For example, after 1606 players were forbidden to take the name of the Lord in vain—that is, every use of the words "God" or "Christ Jesus" or the "Holy Ghost" or the "Trinity" onstage, even in wholly pious contexts, would be subject to a £10 fine.<sup>9</sup> The regulation threatened to remove from the performances not simply a set of names but a whole range of powerful energies, rituals, and experiences. The players' simple and effective response, sanctioned by a long tradition, was to substitute for the interdicted words names like Jove and Jupiter, each a miniature metaphor for the Christian God. To

take a slightly more complex example, when the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "consecrate" the marriage beds with field-dew, they are, in a mode at once natural and magical, enacting (and appropriating to the stage) the Catholic practice of anointing the marriage bed with holy water.<sup>10</sup>

Metaphorical acquisition works by teasing out latent homologies, similitudes, systems of likeness, but it depends equally upon a deliberate distancing or distortion that precedes the disclosure of likeness. Hence a play will insist upon the difference between its representation and the "real," only to draw out the analogy or proportion linking them. The chorus in *Henry V* urgently calls attention to the difference between the theater's power to command the imagination of the audience and the prince's power to command his subjects, but as the play unfolds, those powers become revealingly confounded (see chapter 2). Or again, the strategies of the theater and the family, seemingly far removed, are revealed by *King Lear* to be mirrors of each other.<sup>11</sup>

c. *Acquisition through Synecdoche or Metonymy*. Here the theater acquires cultural energy by isolating and performing one part or attribute of a practice, which then stands for the whole (often a whole that cannot be represented). For example, as I argue in chapter 3, verbal chafing becomes in Shakespeare's comedies not only a sign but a vital instance of an encompassing erotic heat otherwise impossible to stage in the public theater.

Inquiries into the relation between Renaissance theater and society have been situated most often at the level of reflection: images of the monarchy, the lower classes, the legal profession, the church, and so forth. Such studies are essential, but they rarely engage questions of dynamic exchange. They tend instead to posit two separate, autonomous systems and then try to gauge how accurately or effectively the one represents the other. But crucial questions typically remain outside the range of this critical practice: How is it determined what may be staged? To what extent is the object of theatrical representation itself already a representation? What governs the degree of displacement or distortion in theatrical representation? Whose interests are served by the staging? What is the effect of representation on the object or practice represented?

Above all, how is the social energy inherent in a cultural practice negotiated and exchanged?

If we are to attempt an answer to these questions, it would be well to begin with certain abjurations:

1. There can be no appeals to genius as the sole origin of the energies of great art.
2. There can be no motiveless creation.
3. There can be no transcendent or timeless or unchanging representation.
4. There can be no autonomous artifacts.
5. There can be no expression without an origin and an object, a *from* and a *for*.
6. There can be no art without social energy.
7. There can be no spontaneous generation of social energy.

Bound up with these negations are certain generative principles:

1. Mimesis is always accompanied by—indeed is always produced by—negotiation and exchange.
2. The exchanges to which art is a party may involve money, but they may involve other currencies as well. Money is only one kind of cultural capital.
3. The agents of exchange may appear to be individuals (most often, an isolated artist is imagined in relation to a faceless, amorphous entity designated society or culture), but individuals are themselves the products of collective exchange. In the Renaissance theater this collective nature is intensified by the artists' own participation in versions of joint-stock companies. In such companies individual venturers have their own sharply defined identities and interests (and their own initial capital), but to succeed they pool their resources, and they own essential properties in common.

If there is no expressive essence that can be located in an aesthetic object complete unto itself, uncontaminated by interpretation, beyond translation or substitution—if there is no mimesis without exchange—then we need to analyze the collective dynamic circulation of pleasures, anxieties, and interests.<sup>12</sup> This circulation depends upon a separation of artistic practices from other

social practices, a separation produced by a sustained ideological labor, a consensual classification. That is, art does not simply exist in all cultures; it is made up along with other products, practices, discourses of a given culture. (In practice, "made up" means inherited, transmitted, altered, modified, reproduced far more than it means invented: as a rule, there is very little pure invention in culture.) Now the demarcation is rarely, if ever, absolute or complete, nor can we account for it by a single theoretical formulation. We can think up various metaphors to describe the process: the building of a set of walls or fences to separate one territory from adjacent territories; the erection of a gate through which some people and objects will be allowed to pass and others prohibited; the posting of a sign detailing the acceptable code of behavior within the walled territory; the development of a class of functionaries who specialize in the customs of the demarcated zone; the establishment, as in a children's game, of ritualized formulas that can be endlessly repeated. In the case of the public theater of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, these metaphors were literalized: there was the actual construction of a building, the charging of admission to cross the threshold, the set of regulations governing what could and could not be presented on the stage, a set of tacit understandings (for example, no one was actually to be killed or tortured, no one was to have sex onstage, no one was really cursing or praying or conjuring, and so forth), the writing of scripts that could be screened ahead of time by the censors, rehearsals, the relative nonparticipation of the audience, the existence of theater companies of professional actors.

This literalization and institutionalization of the place of art makes the Renaissance theater particularly useful for an analysis of the cultural circulation of social energy, and the stakes of the analysis are heightened by the direct integration of Shakespeare's plays—easily the most powerful, successful, and enduring artistic expressions in the English language—with this particular mode of artistic production and consumption. We are not, that is, dealing with texts written outside the institution and subsequently attached to it or with encysted productions staged in a long-established and ideologically dormant setting but with literary creations designed in intimate and living relation to an emergent commercial practice. For the most part these creations seem intended at once to enhance the power of



the theater as an institution and to draw upon the power this institution has already accumulated. The desire to enhance the general practice of which any particular work is an instance is close to the center of all artistic production, but in the drama this desire is present in a direct, even coarse, sense because of the overwhelming importance and immediacy of material interests. Shakespeare the shareholder was presumably interested not simply in a good return on an individual play but in the health and success of his entire company as it related both to those who helped regulate it and to its audience. Each individual play may be said to make a small contribution to the general store of social energy possessed by the theater and hence to the sustained claim that the theater can make on its real and potential audience.

If each play is bound up with the theater's long-term institutional strategy, it is nonetheless important to avoid the assumption that the relation between mode and individual performance is always harmonious. It is possible for a playwright to be in tension with his own medium, hostile to its presuppositions and conditions, eager to siphon off its powers and attack its pleasures. Ben Jonson's career makes this tension manifest, and one can even glimpse it at moments in Shakespeare's. We can say, perhaps, that an individual play mediates between the mode of the theater, understood in its historical specificity, and elements of the society out of which that theater has been differentiated. Through its representational means, each play carries charges of social energy onto the stage; the stage in its turn revises that energy and returns it to the audience.

Despite the wooden walls and the official regulations, the boundaries between the theater and the world were not fixed, nor did they constitute a logically coherent set; rather they were a sustained collective improvisation. At any given time, the distinction between the theater and the world might be reasonably clear and the boundaries might assume the quality of self-evidence, so that the very cataloging of distinctions might seem absurd: for example, *of course* the theater audience could not intervene in the action on stage, *of course* the violence could only be mimed. But one can think of theaters that swept away every one of the supposedly self-evident distinctions, and more important for our purposes, Renaissance players and audiences could think of such counter-examples.

In consequence, the ratio between the theater and the world, even at its most stable and unchallenged moments, was never *perfectly* taken for granted, that is, experienced as something wholly natural and self-evident. Forces both within and without the theater were constantly calling attention to theatrical practices that violated the established conventions of the English playhouse. When Protestant polemicists characterized the Catholic Mass as theater, the attack conjured up a theater in which (1) the playhouse disguised itself as a holy place; (2) the audience did not think of itself as an audience but as a community of believers; (3) the theatrical performance—with its elaborate costumes and rituals—not only refused to concede that it was an illusion but claimed to be the highest truth; (4) the actors did not fully grasp that they were actors but actually believed in the roles they played and in the symbolic actions they mimed; and (5) the spectacle demanded of the audience not a few pennies and the pleasant wasting of several hours but a lifelong commitment to the institution that staged the show. Similarly, the playwrights themselves frequently called attention in the midst of their plays to alternative theatrical practices. Thus, for example, the denouement of Massinger's *Roman Actor* (like that of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*) turns upon the staging of a mode of theater in which princes and nobles take part in plays and in which the killing turns out to be real. It required no major act of imagination for a Renaissance audience to conceive of either of these alternatives to the conventions of the public playhouse: both were fully operative in the period itself, in the form of masques and courtly entertainments, on the one hand, and public maimings and executions, on the other.

Thus the conventional distinction between the theater and the world, however firmly grasped at a given moment, was not one that went without saying; on the contrary, it was constantly said. This "saying" did not necessarily subvert the distinction; often, in fact, it had the opposite effect, shoring up and insisting upon the boundaries within which the public theater existed. Nor did recognizing alternatives necessarily make these boundaries seem "merely" arbitrary; attacks on illegitimate forms of theater tended to moralize the existing practice. But the consciousness in the sixteenth century, as now, of other ways to construe the relation between the theater and the world heightened awareness of the theater as a contingent prac-

tice, with a set of institutional interests, motives, and constraints and with the concomitant possibility of inadvertently or deliberately violating these very interests. This possibility, even if never put into practice, affected the relation of the theater both to social and political authorities and to its own sense of itself: even the theater's moments of docile self-regulation, the instances of its willingness to remain well within conventional limits, were marked out as strategies, institutional decisions taken to secure the material well-being of the playing company.

The sustained cultural representation of alternative theatrical practices was probably sufficient by itself to call attention to the specific interests, vulnerabilities, and objective social conditions of the public stage. Even without transgression or persecution, the theater would have been denied the luxury at times granted to privileged cultural institutions, particularly those that perform public rites and preserve cultural memory: the luxury of forgetting that its representatives have a concrete, material interest in the rituals they perform and the boundaries they observe. But in fact the theater in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries constantly violated its interests and transgressed its boundaries. Indeed these boundaries were defined in relation to transgressions that were fully understood as such only after the fact, and the interests of the theater could be clearly understood only when they had been violated. The Tudor and Stuart regulations governing the public stage were confused, inconsistent, and haphazard, the products neither of a traditional, collective understanding nor of a coherent, rational attempt to regularize and define a new cultural practice. They were instead a jumble of traditional rules and offices designed to govern older, very different theatrical practices and a set of ordinances drawn up hastily in response to particular and local pressures. As a result, even the relatively peaceful and prosperous moments in the troubled life of a theater company had an air of improvisation rather than of established and settled fact.<sup>13</sup>

This institutional improvisation frames the local improvisations of individual playwrights. Hence Shakespeare's representational equipment included not only the ideological constraints within which the theater functioned as an institution but also a set of received stories and generic expectations, including, as his career progressed, those established by his own earlier plays. And though in

many of his materials he worked within fairly well-defined boundaries—he could not, for example, have Prince Hal lose the battle of Agincourt—Shakespeare actually had at every point a surprising range of movement. The choices he made were not purely subjective or individual or disinterested, but they were choices: there are dozens of tellings of the Lear story—it is part of the ideology of the family in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance—yet in none of them, so far as I know, does Cordelia die in Lear's arms.

But if we grant the Elizabethan theater this provisional character, should we not say that its air of improvisatory freedom is countered by a still greater insistence on the contained and scripted nature of the represented actions? After all, theatrical performance is distinct from most other social practices precisely insofar as its character is predetermined and enclosed, as it forces its audience to grant that retrospective necessity was prospective: the formal necessity disclosed when one looks back on events that have already occurred was in fact the necessity disclosed in the existence, before the performance itself, of the script.<sup>14</sup> Life outside the theater is full of confusion, schemes imperfectly realized, arbitrary interference, unexpected and unpredictable resistances from the body. On the stage this confusion is at once mimed and revealed to be only scripted. Of course, we may say that even onstage there is no certainty: the actors may forget their lines or blurt them out before their cue or altogether refuse to perform, the clown may decide to improvise, individuals in the audience may abandon the voluntary submission expected of them and intervene in the performance, the scaffolding may collapse and force the cancellation of the show. But this absurd, almost entirely theoretical contingency only gives the touch of freedom that seasons that disclosure of necessity.

We could argue further that one of the ideological functions of the theater was precisely to create in its audience the sense that what seemed spontaneous or accidental was in fact fully plotted ahead of time by a playwright carefully calculating his effects, that behind experienced uncertainty there was design, whether the design of the human patriarchs—the fathers and rulers who unceasingly watched over the errant courses of their subjects—or the overarching design of the divine patriarch. The theater then would confirm the structure of human experience as proclaimed by those on top and would urge us to reconfirm this structure in our pleasure.

But if the improvisational provisionality of the theater is not necessarily subversive ideologically, neither is the hidden order of scripted performance necessarily orthodox. Not only can the audience withhold its confirmation of that order and refuse to applaud, but the order itself is marked out as theatrical and to that extent unreal. In applauding, the audience need only be confirming its own practical interests in the playhouse.

Can we speak, however, of "practical interests" in this context? Should we not say that the theater escapes from the network of practices that governs the circulation of social energy? The public theater would seem to be of no use to the audience at all in providing material or symbolic strategic advantage: the events depicted on the stage do not impinge directly on the practical arrangements of the members of the audience, and via the script an abstractness, an atemporality, is concealed behind the powerful illusion of unfolding life.

These special conditions, though important, do not constitute the theater as a place radically detached from the realm of social practice. In the first place, the theater does have obvious use-value for several classes of people: those who act, write for it, regulate it, provide costumes, build and maintain the playhouses, ferry customers across the river, pick pockets or pick up tricks during the performance, provide refreshment, sweep up after the crowd, and so forth. Only one group—the audience—appears to be excluded from practical activity, and an activity cannot become nonpractical because it excludes a social group, for then virtually all activities would become nonpractical. Second, the audience's pleasure is in some important senses useful. The Renaissance had theories, as we do, arguing on both physiological and psychological grounds for the practical necessity of recreation, and these were supplemented by explicitly political theories. An audience watching a play, Nashe suggested, would not be hatching a rebellion. Third, the practical usefulness of the theater depends largely on the illusion of its distance from ordinary social practice. The triumphant cunning of the theater is to make its spectators forget that they are participating in a practical activity, to invent a sphere that seems far removed from the manipulations of the everyday. Shakespeare's theater is powerful and effective precisely to the extent that the audience believes it to be nonuseful and hence nonpractical.<sup>15</sup> And

this belief gives the theater an unusually broad license to conduct its negotiations and exchanges with surrounding institutions, authorities, discourses, and practices.

These negotiations were defined by the unequivocal *exclusion* of relatively little from the privileged space of the playhouse, even though virtually everything represented on the stage was at least potentially dangerous and hence could be scrutinized and censored. The Elizabethan theater could, within limits, represent the sacred as well as the profane, contemporary as well as ancient times, stories set in England as well as those set in distant lands. Allusions to the reigning monarch, and even to highly controversial issues in the reign, were not necessarily forbidden (though the company had to tread cautiously); the outlawed practices and agents of the Catholic faith could be represented with considerable sympathy, along with Turks, Jews, witches, demons, fairies, wild men, ghosts. Above all—and the enabling agent of this range of representational resources—the language of the theater was astonishingly open: the most solemn formulas of the church and state could find their way onto the stage and mingle with the language of the marketplace, just as elevated verse could alternate in the same play with the homeliest of prose. The theater is marked off from the "outside world" and licensed to operate as a distinct domain, but its boundaries are remarkably permeable.

For the circulation of social energy by and through the stage was not part of a single coherent, totalizing system. Rather it was partial, fragmentary, conflictual; elements were crossed, torn apart, recombined, set against each other; particular social practices were magnified by the stage, others diminished, exalted, evacuated. What then is the social energy that is being circulated? Power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, wonder, desire, anxiety, religious awe, free-floating intensities of experience: in a sense the question is absurd, for everything produced by the society can circulate unless it is deliberately excluded from circulation. Under such circumstances, there can be no single method, no overall picture, no exhaustive and definitive cultural poetics.

I offer instead four chapters that may be read as separate essays. I had thought at first to weave them together, for their local concerns intersect and their general project is the same, but the whole point is that they do not sketch a unified field. Each chapter focuses on a

different one of the major genres in which Shakespeare worked. As many scholars have demonstrated, there is no exclusive, categorical force behind these generic distinctions, but they are useful markers of different areas of circulation, different types of negotiation: in the histories, a theatrical acquisition of charisma through the subversion of charisma; in the comedies, an acquisition of sexual excitement through the staging of transvestite friction; in the tragedies, an acquisition of religious power through the evacuation of a religious ritual; and in the romances, an acquisition of salutary anxiety through the experience of a threatening plenitude. None of these acquisitions exhausts the negotiation, for the genre itself or even for a particular play, and the social energies I have detected in one genre may be found in equal measure in another. Plays are made up of multiple exchanges, and the exchanges are multiplied over time, since to the transactions through which the work first acquired social energy are added supplementary transactions through which the work renews its power in changed circumstances. My principal interest is in the early exchanges—in understanding how the energies were first collected and deployed and returned to the culture from which they came—but there is no direct access to these exchanges, no pure moment when the energy was passed and the process began. We can reconstruct at least aspects of the conditions in which the theater acquired its remarkable power, but we do so under the terms of our own interests and pleasures and in the light of historical developments that cannot simply be stripped away.

I had dreamed of speaking with the dead, and even now I do not abandon this dream. But the mistake was to imagine that I would hear a single voice, the voice of the other. If I wanted to hear one, I had to hear the many voices of the dead. And if I wanted to hear the voice of the other, I had to hear my own voice. The speech of the dead, like my own speech, is not private property.

## Chapter Two



## Invisible Bullets

In his notorious police report of 1593 on Christopher Marlowe, the Elizabethan spy Richard Baines informed his superiors that Marlowe had declared, among other monstrous opinions, that "Moses was but a Juggler, and that one Heriots being Sir W Raleighs man Can do more than he."<sup>1</sup> The "Heriots" cast for a moment in this lurid light is Thomas Harriot, the most profound Elizabethan mathematician, an expert in cartography, optics, and navigational science, an adherent of atomism, the first Englishman to make a telescope and turn it on the heavens, the author of the first original book about the first English colony in America, and the possessor throughout his career of a dangerous reputation for atheism.<sup>2</sup> In all of his extant writings, private correspondence as well as public discourse, Harriot professes the most reassuringly orthodox religious faith, but the suspicion persisted. When he died of cancer in 1621, one of his contemporaries, persuaded that Harriot had challenged the doctrinal account of creation *ex nihilo*, remarked gleefully that "a *nihilum* killed him at last: for in the top of his nose came a little red speck (exceeding small), which grew bigger and bigger, and at last killed him."<sup>3</sup>

Charges of atheism leveled at Harriot or anyone else in this period are difficult to assess, for such accusations were smear tactics, used with reckless abandon against anyone whom the accuser happened to dislike. At a dinner party one summer evening in 1593, Sir Walter Raleigh teased an irascible country parson named Ralph Ironside and found himself the subject of a state investigation; at the other end of the social scale, in the same Dorsetshire

## Notes

### 1. The Circulation of Social Energy

1. The classic formulation is by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr.: "In each poem there is something (an individual intuition—or a concept) which can never be expressed in other terms" ("The Structure of the 'Concrete Universal' in Literature," in *Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment*, ed. Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, and Gordon McKenzie, rev. ed. [New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1958], p. 403).

2. To be sure, a wide range of literary studies have implicitly, and on occasion explicitly, addressed the collective experience of theater: E. K. Chambers's encyclopedic studies of the theatrical institutions in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Glynne Wickham's volumes on early English stages, Robert Weimann's analysis of Shakespeare and the popular tradition, C. L. Barber's discussion of Shakespeare and folk rituals, a large number of books and articles on the rhetorical materials with which Shakespeare worked, and so forth. The present study is an attempt to supplement these volumes by exploring the poetics of Renaissance culture.

3. We may posit (and feel) the presence of a powerful and highly individuated creative intelligence, but that creativity does not lead us back to a moment of pure sublime invention, nor does it secure a formal textual autonomy.

4. Novels may have been read aloud to members of the household, but the differentiation of the domestic group is alien to the organization of the theatrical audience.

5. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1904) 2:148. See, likewise, Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie*, in Smith, 1:201. The term derives ultimately from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (33.2.2), as interpreted especially by Quintilian (*Institutio* 8.3.89) and Scaliger (*Poetices* 3.27).

6. And back before the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries

as well, since the transactions that enable the creation of Shakespeare's plays are possible only because of prior transactions. Theoretically, at least, the chain has no end, though any inquiry has practical limits and, moreover, certain moments seem more important than others.

7. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Le Miroir: Essai sur une légende scientifique: Révélation, science fiction, et fallacies* (Paris: Elmayan, 1978).

8. These items are from the inventory of the Lord Admiral's Men in *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), app. 2, pp. 320-25.

9. For the terms of "An Acte to Restraine Abuses of Players," see E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), 4:338-9. It is not clear how strictly this regulation was enforced.

10. These maneuvers were not always successful. In 1639 it is reported that "Thursday last the players of the Fortune were fined 1000£ for setting up an altar, a bason, and two candlesticks, and bowing down before it upon the stage, and although they allege that it was an old play revived, and an altar to the heathen gods, yet it was apparent that this play was revived on purpose in contempt of the ceremonies of the Church" (quoted in Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1941-68], 1:277). Bentley expresses some reservations about the accuracy of this account.

11. Stephen Greenblatt, "The Cultivation of Anxiety: King Lear and His Heirs," *Raritan* 2 (1982): 92-124. I should add that the members of joint-stock companies in the early modern period customarily referred to each other in familial terms.

12. "Dynamic circulation" is Michel Foucault's phrase (*L'Usage des plaisirs*, vol. 2 of *Histoire de la sexualité* [Paris: Gallimard, 1984], pp. 52-53).

13. Glynne Wickham, who has argued that the Elizabethan regulations were somewhat more methodical than I have allowed, emphasizes the players' creative flexibility in response: "It is this freedom from rigidly doctrinaire approaches to play writing and play production, coupled with the will to adapt and improvise creatively within the limits of existing opportunities, which ultimately explains the triumph of Elizabethan drama over the censorship and the triumph of Jacobean and Caroline actors in bringing this drama successfully to birth despite the determined efforts of the clergy, town-councillors and Chambers of Commerce to suppress it" (*Early English Stages*, 1300-1660, vol. 2, part 2: 1576-1660 [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972], p. 208). But we might add—as Wickham himself recognizes—that some of the most severe regulations, such as those suppressing the great mystery cycles and prohibiting unlicensed playing troupes, very much helped the major Elizabethan and Jacobean companies.

14. For reflections on this distinction between retrospective and prospective necessity, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). I have found Bourdieu's book extremely suggestive.

15. In this regard, we may invoke what Bourdieu calls "a restricted definition of economic interest" that is the historical product of capitalism:

The constitution of relatively autonomous areas of practice is accompanied by a process through which symbolic interests (often described as "spiritual" or "cultural") come to be set up in opposition to strictly economic interests as defined in the field of economic transactions by the fundamental tautology "business is business"; strictly "cultural" or "aesthetic" interest, disinterested interest, is the paradoxical product of the ideological labour in which writers and artists, those most directly interested, have played an important part and in the course of which symbolic interests become autonomous by being opposed to material interests, i.e., by being symbolically nullified as interests. (p. 177)

## 2. Invisible Bullets

1. John Bakeless, *The Tragical History of Christopher Marlowe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), 1:111. Juggler is a richly complex word, including in its range of associations con man, cheap entertainer, magician, trickster, storyteller, conjurer, actor, and dramatist.

2. On Harriot, see especially Thomas Harriot, *Renaissance Scientist*, ed. John W. Shirley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Muriel Rukeyser, *The Traces of Thomas Harriot* (New York: Random House, 1970); and Jean Jacquot, "Thomas Harriot's Reputation for Impiety," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 9 (1952): 164-87. Harriot himself appears to have paid close attention to his reputation; see David B. Quinn and John W. Shirley, "A Contemporary List of Harriot References," *Renaissance Quarterly* 22 (1969): 9-26.

3. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, 2 vols., ed. Andrew Clark (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 1:286.

4. For the investigation of Raleigh, see Willobie His Avis (1594), ed. G. B. Harrison (London: John Lane, 1926), app. 3, pp. 255-71; for Oliver's story, see Ernest A. Strathmann, *Sir Walter Raleigh: A Study in Elizabethan Skepticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), p. 50.

5. There are, to be sure, some evangelical professions of having been saved from atheism. On treason see Lacey Baldwin Smith, "English Treason Trials and Confessions in the Sixteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15 (1954): 471-98.

6. See, for example, the story William Strachey borrows from Henri Estienne's commentary on Herodotus: "Pope Leo the 10. answered Cardinall Bembo that alleadged some parte of the Ghospell vnto him: 'Lord Cardinall, what a wealth this fable of Iesus Christ hath gotten vs?'" (William Strachey, *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* [1612], ed. Louis B. Wright and Virginia Freund, Hakluyt Society 2d ser., no. 103 [London, 1953], p. 101).

7. Jacquot, "Thomas Harriot's Reputation for Impiety," p. 167. In another official record, Popham is reported to have said ominously, "You know what men say of *Hereiat*" (John W. Shirley, "Sir Walter Raleigh and