S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

10:2 2024

Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliazzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it
info@skeneproject.it

Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com
www.edizioniets.com

Distribuzione
Messaggerie Libri SPA
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN: 9788-8467-7127-8
ISBN (pdf): 9788-8467-7126-1
ISSN 2421-4353

Contents

Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino, and Eugenio Refini

Miscellany

Special Section

David Lucking*

Famous Last Words: the Rhetoric of Death and Dying in Shakespeare

Abstract

This essay examines a number of speeches in Shakespeare's plays that are occasioned by the death of a character within them or by the imminent prospect of such a death. These include statements made by the dying persons themselves, eulogies delivered after their deaths, and various other forms of commentary elicited by their demise. Particular attention is paid to speeches pronounced by individuals seeking at the moment of death to shape how posterity will view them, and to those that constitute more or less deliberate appropriations of the deceased's memory by parties pursuing personal or ideological agendas of their own. The varied and sometimes clashing intentions motivating such speeches are frequently reflected in the differing ways in which the individual is viewed in retrospect, contributing thereby to the multiplication of perspectives which is a hallmark of Shakespearean drama.

Keywords: Shakespeare; eulogy; epitaph; self-fashioning; appropriation

Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs.
(*Richard II* 3.2.141)

1.

The purpose of the following essay is to examine a number of speeches in Shakespeare's plays that are occasioned by the death of a character within them or by the imminent prospect of such a death. This broad category includes statements made by the dying individuals themselves, eulogies delivered after their deaths, and various forms of elegy, epitaph, valediction, and even adverse or otherwise judgmental commentary that are prompted by their demise. Such utterances often constitute moments of personal evaluation or validation, when the significance of a life is summed up by the dying person for their own benefit or that of their auditors. In some instances, they might provide the occasion for the affirmation of collective values, whether they be those of the community to which the deceased has belonged, or of one whose tenets they have transgressed and which must

* University of Salento, Lecce (retired) — davidianlucking@gmail.com

© SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies 10:2 (2024), 215-35
https://www.skenejournal.skeneproject.it

come to terms with what they represent. But it might also happen that they serve more covert objectives, as those delivering them seek either to appropriate the memory of the deceased for personal or ideological motives of their own or, in the case of the dying person, to preempt such efforts at appropriation by determining for themselves the image they wish to transmit to posterity.

Precisely because the purposes of such speeches diverge so fundamentally, it is only to be expected that significant discrepancies will arise between what characters say about themselves at the moment of death and what is subsequently said about them, as well as between the accounts of those characters' lives that are formulated by different commentators. While dying persons in Shakespeare often endeavour to define themselves *in extremis*, find a comprehensive meaning in an existence which is coming to an end, or simply justify or vindicate themselves and their conduct in their final moments,[1] eulogies and other kinds of postmortem commentary often respond to quite different exigencies.[2] In *Julius Caesar*, Antony famously commences his funeral oration over Caesar's body by observing that "The evil that men do lives after them; / The good is oft interrèd with their bones" (3.2.76-7),[3] but despite the attitude of resigned indifference he assumes with respect to such processes of posthumous refashioning he himself proceeds to shape the image of his late mentor in the manner most conducive to his own political ends. As this instance illustrates, while a eulogy might in some cases reflect a sincere effort to memorialise or pay tribute to the deceased, it just as often constitutes an attempt to enlist the memory of the departed into a narrative that is not their own.

[1] Shakespeare's interest in the significance of dying speeches reflects that of his age. For a discussion of the importance attached in Early Modern England to the statements made by individuals at the final moment before death, see Wunderli and Broce 1989. For explorations of that subset of this category of speeches consisting in the last words pronounced by condemned persons, see Sharpe 1985 and Dolan 1994.

[2] For studies of the functions served by epitaphs in Early Modern England, see Sherlock 2008 and Newstok 2009. Claire Bryony Williams examines how epitaphs were circulated in manuscript form in Williams 2014. For a discussion of the epitaph on Shakespeare's own tomb, see Lucking 2016. H. Austin Whitver's investigation into the ways in which the use of tombs "to construct fictive narratives to perpetuate a myth or to act as loci of moral instruction" is reflected in Shakespeare's drama is also highly relevant to the issues I am considering here (Whitver 2023, this quotation 13).

[3] All references to Shakespeare's works throughout this essay are to the single volume Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works (2006).

2.

In view of the nature of the speeches to be considered in the following discussion, a logical point of departure might be the one play by Shakespeare that begins with an actual funeral, this being the first part of *Henry VI*. The exequies being celebrated as the drama opens are for King Henry V, and involve a series of speeches glorifying the late monarch in the hyperbolic terms the occasion seems to warrant. The Duke of Gloucester's speech is a particularly fulsome exercise in celebrative eulogy:

> England ne'er had a king until his time.
> Virtue he had, deserving to command.
> His brandished sword did blind men with his beams.
> His arms spread wider than a dragon's wings.
> His sparking eyes, replete with wrathful fire,
> More dazzled and drove back his enemies
> Than midday sun, fierce bent against their faces.
> What should I say? His deeds exceed all speech.
> He ne'er lift up his hand but conquered.
> (1.1.8-16)

In this panegyric the memory of the deceased sovereign has been wholly subsumed beneath a radically idealised, and extravagantly magnified, version of what he has been in life, at the expense of anything resembling a human dimension. Since for those of his caste what Gloucester calls "virtue" consists almost exclusively in prowess on the battlefield, there is no talk in his speech about the late king's qualities as a human being, about his ability to administer a nation or ameliorate the life of his people, about his grieving family or, for that matter, about his grieving country. It is precisely for the reason that all facets of Henry's character other than those of the soldier have been effectively erased from recollection that he can be perceived in retrospect as being endowed with almost superhuman stature, justifying the myth of a warrior king "too famous to live long" (6) which is being assiduously woven by those who survive him.

During his own lifetime the monarch commemorated so effusively has gone to significant lengths to resist such manufactured fame, insisting that it is the practical exploits performed on the battlefield rather than the ephemeral reputations built on them which are truly worthy of admiration. Such an opinion is expressed for example at that point in *Henry V* when he declares that "Either our history shall with full mouth / Speak freely of our acts, or else our grave . . . shall have a tongueless mouth, / Not worshipped with a waxen epitaph" (1.2.230-3). Notwithstanding the indifference he professes for the malleable epitaphs that testify to what are, in the final

analysis, no more than provisional and perhaps even negotiable reputations, however, Henry himself is not above a little strategic myth-making when it serves his turn. This appears for instance in the aftermath of the trial at arms in which he defeats in single combat the man who has rebelled against his father's rule in the first part of *Henry IV*. While the words with which he initially confronts Hotspur on the battlefield are full of bristling hostility, no sooner has he vanquished his adversary than he delivers himself of a speech apostrophising his fallen foe in more subdued accents as "brave Percy" and "great heart" (5.4.86). The operations of the process by which the memory of the dead man is judiciously purged of those elements that do not conform to the prince's own chivalric code of honour are perfectly manifest in this speech, and they work in a manner, significantly enough, which is the reverse of that invoked by Antony in *Julius Caesar*:

> Adieu, and take thy praise with thee to heaven.
> Thy ignominy sleep with thee in the grave,
> But not remembered in thy epitaph.
> (98-100)

Harry is here voicing the hope that it will be the positive attributes of Hotspur – by which he means his courage and high-minded nobility – that will be recollected in the future, while whatever defects might have resided in his character will be consigned to the oblivion of a tomb. By extension, or so at least it might be surmised in view of his own somewhat mottled history, he is also expressing the hope that the same mechanisms of selective remembering will one day be applied to himself. What is implicit in his concern for Hotspur's posthumous reputation is a community of values which transcends the rivalry and even the mutual antagonism of those participating in that community. Harry has hunted Percy to the death, but the very intensity of that pursuit makes the two men kindred spirits and not merely enemies. This sense of kinship is reflected in the marked contrast in tone between the valedictory lines that Harry dedicates to Hotspur and the considerably less elevated eulogy he pronounces a few moments later over what appears to be the inanimate body of his former boon companion Falstaff:

> What, old acquaintance! Could not all this flesh
> Keep in a little life? Poor Jack, farewell.
> I could have better spared a better man.
> O, I should have a heavy miss of thee,
> If I were much in love with vanity.
> Death hath not struck so fat a deer today,
> Though many dearer in this bloody fray.
> (101-7)

There is a certain amount of grudging affection in this speech, but none of the respect that has been accorded Hotspur, and the laboured punning on the words *deer* and *dear* might be regarded as being in doubtful taste under the circumstances.[4] Nor is the speech very relevant coming when it does, since for the moment at least Falstaff is still very much alive, and is in his own way as exuberantly vigorous as ever. Unabashedly craven as he is, and holding in utter contempt the chivalric code that is so detrimental to the prospects of survival for those professing it, he is merely feigning to be dead in order to avoid a fight. But if in his brief eulogy Harry has alluded to his former companion in the tones of disparagement proper to his own princely station, it is in more essentially human terms that Falstaff is recalled when he actually does expire in *Henry V.* The account of his final moments is given by the hostess of a tavern of which Falstaff was an assiduous frequenter, who naturally enough sees him from another standpoint than that of the heroic code which the newly crowned Henry has come full-heartedly to embrace:

> Nay, sure he's not in hell. He's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. A made a finer end, and went away an it had been any christom child. A parted ev'n just between twelve and one, ev'n at the turning o'th' tide – for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his finger's end, I knew there was but one way. For his nose was as sharp as a pen, and a babbled of green fields. "How now, Sir John?" quoth I. "What, man! Be o' good cheer." So a cried out, "God, God, God", three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him a should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So a bade me lay more clothes on his feet. I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone. Then I felt to his knees, and so up'ard and up'ard, and all was as cold as any stone. (2.3.9-26)

Notwithstanding his seeming to embody all the vices that flesh is heir to, and as such having been repudiated by the fledgling king who is forging a new and socially more responsible identity for himself, Falstaff is here recalled in tones of the utmost tenderness simply as a lovable old man. That even the corpulent figure of Falstaff can be viewed in such radically disparate lights by those acquainted with him is a revealing example of the perspectivism which, as various critics have remarked, is a hallmark of Shakespeare's drama,[5] and

[4] Although, oddly enough, Antony will indulge in similar wordplay over the body of Caesar in *Julius Caesar* 3.1.205-11.

[5] Barbara Freedman refers to Shakespeare's "perspectival plays" (1991, 24), Harold Bloom applies to the playwright the epithet of "endlessly perspectivizing Shakespeare" (1999, 175), and Mustapha Fahmi speaks more generally of "perspectivism" as being "one of the most fundamental laws of the Shakespeare universe" (2010, 130). Though the terminology used is sometimes different, numerous other commentators have

which can be seen operating in the playwright's treatment of other characters under discussion here as well.

Hamlet, one of Shakespeare's most death-haunted plays, affords a number of instances of postmortem commentary which, like Harry's eulogies, reveal more about the speaker than the deceased. As early as the second scene, for example, we have Hamlet's comparison of his late father to his uncle Claudius as "So excellent a king, that was to this / Hyperion to a satyr" (1.2.139-40), assimilating the men being spoken of to mythological archetypes in order to emphasise the contrast between them and so, once again, effectively effacing the human dimension of each. Later in the play Hamlet, after having committed the blunder of murdering Polonius in an excess of homicidal zeal, adds insult to injury by gratuitously indulging in a number of contemptuous comments at the expense of his victim, deriding him as a "wretched, rash, intruding fool" (3.4.30), and later as "most still, most secret, and most grave, / Who was in life a foolish prating knave" (188-9) – judgements which may not be shared by all members of the audience. The prince's most famous speech on the subject of a dead person is of course that he pronounces as he holds in his hands the skull of the dead jester Yorick:

> Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio – a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred my imagination is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that. (5.1.180-90)

The skull of a man once renowned for his ready wit and infectious gaiety is thus converted into an emblem not only of human mortality but also of the futility of a life that leads ineluctably to the grave, an incongruous fate for a man who evidently took considerable pleasure in existence and was capable of making others do the same. It is left for the spectator of the play to decide whether this transformation of his skull into a symbol of existential meaninglessness in the morbid ruminations of the Danish prince is the last and only word concerning the significance of Yorick's life, or for that matter that of any other individual.

Other speeches inspired by the memory of a deceased person are to be found in *Hamlet* as well. Perhaps the most celebrated of these is Gertrude's lyrical description of Ophelia's death which, interrupting an earnest discussion between Claudius and Laertes about how they can most expeditiously

written in a similar vein.

dispatch Hamlet, interjects itself as a brief but poignant counterpoint to the brutal discourses of violence and revenge that are gathering momentum at the court of Denmark:

> There is a willow grows aslant a brook
> That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
> Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
> Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
> That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
> But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
> There on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds
> Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
> When down the weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
> And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up;
> Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
> As one incapable of her own distress,
> Or like a creature native and endued
> Unto that element. But long it could not be
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
> Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death.
> (4.7.138-55)

The circumstances of Ophelia's death are thus evoked in a manner that would capture the imagination of poets and artists long after Shakespeare, to the extent indeed that the iconography inspired by this event rivals that associated with Hamlet himself. Even Ophelia's brother Laertes, who is by no means immune to the climate of violence prevailing in Elsinore, echoes the tenor of Gertrude's description when he bids the assembled mourners to "Lay her i'th' earth, / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring" (5.1.233-5). Much different in tone is Hamlet's own response when he witnesses the funeral and realises that Ophelia is dead:

> I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
> Could not, with all their quantity of love,
> Make up my sum.
> (266-8)

Hamlet's comment is clearly more focussed upon himself and the intensity of his own sentiments than upon the girl for whose death he is at least indirectly responsible. Instead of mourning the passing of Ophelia or even inquiring about the manner of her death he immediately turns his attention to Laertes, insisting that his own love exceeds that of which a brother is

capable, and provoking a pointless and unseemly quarrel over the grave before storming off in petulant fury. The suspicion is that even as a memory Ophelia scarcely exists for the prince except insofar as she can serve as a pretext for an altercation which, for whatever mysterious reason, he seems inordinately eager to precipitate. Certain it is that after this episode Hamlet has nothing whatsoever to say about the girl he professes to have loved, a disturbing silence that continues to reverberate until the end of the play.

Silence , indeed, is quite literally the last word in Hamlet's own life as well. He does not have time to make any final pronouncements after Laertes's poison begins to take effect, and his dying comment that "the rest is silence" is an appropriate concluding utterance for a man who insists at one point that the "heart of my mystery" can never be penetrated (5.2.310, 353-4). He delegates the task to Horatio to "Report me and my cause aright" (291) and to "tell my story" (301), but we cannot know what Horatio will choose to say in the event. He bids farewell to Hamlet with the words "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (312-13), but when it comes to rendering an account of the events in which his friend has become caught up he can produce nothing more illuminating than the following:

> And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
> How these things came about. So shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause;
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fall'n on th'inventors' heads. All this can I
> Truly deliver.
> (333-40)

This is hardly fulfilling the mandate Hamlet has assigned him to tell his story. Significantly enough, it is not Hamlet's friend Horatio, but Fortinbras, the son of his father's enemy who will succeed him to the Danish throne, who pronounces the only thing resembling a genuine eulogy, and it is a very strange one:

> Let four captains
> Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
> For he was likely, had he been put on,
> To have proved most royally; and for his passage,
> The soldier's music and the rites of war
> Speak loudly for him.
> (349-54)

In view of what we have come to learn of Hamlet's tortured personality, this must be considered an almost textbook instance of posthumous refashioning. As Harold Goddard points out, "the sarcasm of fate could go no further. Hamlet, who aspired to nobler things, is treated at death as if he were the mere image of his father: a warrior" (1960, 381). What Fortinbras would seem to be intent on doing as he prepares to ascend the throne is, as Arthur Kinney surmises might be the case, "to appropriate Hamlet to help claim authority in Denmark" (Kinney 2002, 94), representing the deceased prince as having been a worthy predecessor to himself by retrospectively reconstructing his character in the light of the martial code he himself lives by. The dark figure of the brooding scholar, those traits which have made him what Jonathan Bate describes as "an icon of consciousness" for generations of readers (1997, 278), are forgotten in the formal splendours of the military exequies that are virtually thrust upon him after his death, and since he has failed to make any dying statement on his own behalf it can only be the rites of war that will speak for him.

3.

Julius Caesar contains a number of eulogies, including what amount to being anticipatory self-eulogies. Caesar himself, though oblivious to the fate that is about to overtake him, produces a resounding testimonial to his own greatness in the final speech he pronounces before the conspirators strike him down. In keeping with his accustomed manner, it is an exercise in rather blatant self-fabrication, the speaker's intention being to project the idealised image he has of himself and reify it in rhetoric. "I could be well moved if I were as you" (3.1.56), he superciliously chides the conspirators who, seeking a pretext for the assassination they have planned, are urging him to rescind one of his own decrees, and he continues to drive home the point in terms calculated to antagonise all who hear him:

> But I am constant as the Northern Star,
> Of whose true fixed and resting quality
> There is no fellow in the firmament.
> The skies are painted with unnumbered sparks;
> They are all fire, and every one doth shine;
> But there's but one in all doth hold his place.
> So in the world: 'tis furnished well with men,
> And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
> Yet in the number I do know but one
> That unassailable holds on his rank,
> Unshaked of motion; and that I am he
> (58-68)

This is stirring stuff from the rhetorical point of view, and may serve to confirm Caesar in his own exalted opinion of himself, but it has little to do with reality. The irony of this speech is that only a short time before we have witnessed Caesar vacillating wildly about whether to follow through with his plan of presenting himself before the Senate (2.2.1-107), while Cassius has been snidely sedulous in recalling a number of incidents which cast a dubious light on Caesar's steadfastness earlier in the play (1.2.102-30). Caesar might be any number of remarkable things, but constant as the Northern Star he is not.

It falls to Antony to deliver the real eulogy, and it is perhaps not of a kind that Caesar would have wished for. Upon first catching sight of the mutilated remains of his friend he apostrophises him with the words "Thou are the ruins of the noblest man / That ever livèd in the tide of times" (3.1.259-60), which – given that he is not playing to an audience when he pronounces it – we can assume is an essentially unaffected tribute on his part. But other strategies of memorialisation are at work in the masterfully contrived funeral oration that follows, the delivery of which constitutes a pivotal moment not only in this play but, according to Shakespeare's reading of events at least, in the history of Rome itself. This follows on the heels of Brutus's terse and deliberately dispassionate address:

> As Caesar loved me, I weep for him. As he was fortunate, I rejoice at it. As he was valiant, I honour him. But, as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love, joy for his fortune, honour for his valour, and death for his ambition. (3.2.24-9)

In contrast with this ostentatiously austere speech Antony's extended declamation is a *tour de force* of emotively charged rhetoric, intended less to render sincere homage to the assassinated man than to inflame the populace against those who have murdered him. Instead of rehearsing Caesar's qualities as a soldier and statesman, Antony portrays him with vivid pathos as a compassionate benefactor to his people – "When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept" (92) – caught in the snare of cruel and envious conspirators:

> You all do know this mantle. I remember
> The first time ever Caesar put it on.
> 'Twas on a summer's evening in his tent,
> That day he overcame the Nervii.
> Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through.
> See what a rent the envious Casca made.
> Through this the well-belovèd Brutus stabbed;
> And as he plucked his cursèd steel away,
> Mark how the blood of Caesar followed it,

As rushing out of doors to be resolved
If Brutus so unkindly knocked or no –
For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel.
Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him!
This was the most unkindest cut of all.
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquished him. Then burst his mighty heart,
And in his mantle muffling up his face,
Even at the base of Pompey's statue,
Which all the while ran blood, great Caesar fell.
(168-87)

The conception of Caesar that emerges from this oration corresponds neither to the dead man's idea of himself nor to the conspirators' view of him, the indeterminacy of character resulting from such discrepancies accentuating the problem of epistemological relativism which, as various commentators have recognised, constitutes a central concern in this play.[6] The fact that Antony's speech "destroys the single, stable significance presumed by Brutus", as David Willbern puts it (2005, 223), demonstrates the degree to which the identity of any individual is less a property intrinsic to the self than a transient figment of the rhetorical imagination.[7]

This applies to the other characters who appear in *Julius Caesar* as well. Like the man he has assassinated, Brutus himself utters what is tantamount to being a self-eulogy as he makes preparations for his own death, one that is under the circumstances somewhat ingenuous in its attempt to snatch moral victory from the jaws of military defeat:

Countrymen,
My heart doth joy that yet in all my life

[6] In his fine analysis of the issue of interpretive subjectivity as it is explored in the play, Jeffrey Yu argues that Shakespeare "illustrates the manner in which reality is construed by the perceiver and dramatises a Caesar of signifiers, instead of grappling with an evasive signified" (2007, 104). For an earlier, but still highly relevant, treatment of Julius Caesar as "a dramatization of the impact of point of view upon one's perception of truth", see Fortin 1968, this quotation 342.

[7] Of the speeches delivered by Brutus and Antony respectively Gayle Greene remarks that "each oration creates its own Caesar, or its own illusion of Caesar. Both cannot be true, yet nothing we have seen of Caesar enables us to know which to accept" (1980, 88). In much the same vein, Millicent Bell argues that the two speeches "illustrate how a public figure is without essentiality", raising the question of whether Caesar might not be, "like all famous men, the product of the publicist's rhetoric, or the historian's or biographer's art of portraiture, as well as of his own crafting of an expedient self" (2002, 249).

I found no man but he was true to me.
I shall have glory by this losing day,
More than Octavius and Mark Antony
By this vile conquest shall attain unto.
(5.5.33-8)

But this is no more than Brutus's own wistful and self-consolatory view of himself, an adumbration of the somewhat romanticised image he would like to see perpetuated after his death. For his own part Antony, though harbouring few doubts as to how the glory of the day's battle should be allocated, and little inclined to concede the least portion of that glory to his fallen foe, is nonetheless motivated to pronounce what appears to be an extremely generous eulogy to Brutus's memory at the end of the play:

This was the noblest Roman of them all.
All the conspirators save only he
Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.
He only in a general honest thought
And common good to all made one of them.
His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that nature might stand up
And say to all the world "This was a man".
(67-74)

In this case as well, however, the speech is ultimately self-serving, because it models the image of the dead man along the lines of ideals which, at least for the present, Antony has a vested interest in promoting. Antony can afford to be magnanimous, because Brutus is by now no longer a menace, and his memory can be safely assimilated to the Roman orthodoxy he himself subscribes to. Brutus's motives, so pointedly difficult of access in the play itself, are radically simplified, reduced even to commonplace, as in the final analysis his personality is as well. The culminating assertion that "This was a man", resonant though it is, sounds less like a tribute to a once-living human being than something resembling a secular apotheosis.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* it is Antony's turn to die, after delivering a final speech exalting his personal history and vindicating his integrity as a Roman notwithstanding his having allied himself with an enemy of Rome and waged war against his country:

The miserable change now at my end
Lament nor sorrow at, but please your thoughts
In feeding them with those my former fortunes,
Wherein I lived the greatest prince o'th' world,
The noblest; and do now not basely die,

> Not cowardly put off my helmet to
> My countryman; a Roman by a Roman
> Valiantly vanquished.
> (4.16.53-60)

When he boasts to Cleopatra that he is "a Roman by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished" he is apparently referring to the fact that the wound to which he is succumbing has been inflicted by himself, that he is dying in accordance with what Cleopatra will later call the "high Roman fashion" (89). What he is therefore doing is seeking to reclaim the Roman identity he has earlier abdicated in words that might be read – like Brutus's final declaration of moral victory in *Julius Caesar* – as a kind of anticipatory eulogy to the image of himself he wishes to see propagated after his death. But this is no more than special pleading on his part, because the fact is that in military terms at least it is another Roman who has vanquished Antony. This is Octavius, and it is he who, once having satisfied himself that Antony is safely dead and therefore no longer a threat, delivers a eulogy of his own, one extolling his fallen foe in extravagantly heroic terms but at the same time situating him firmly within the epic he is forging of his own life. He begins by remarking that

> The breaking of so great a thing should make
> A greater crack. The rivèd world
> Should have shook lions into civil streets,
> And citizens to their dens. The death of Antony
> Is not a single doom; in that name lay
> A moiety of the world.
> (5.1.14-19)

And he then goes on to lament the passing of the rival he has been pursuing with such predatory fervour in a manner that recalls Harry's challenge to Hotspur when he encounters him on the battlefield:

> O Antony,
> I have followed thee to this. But we do lance
> Diseases in our bodies. I must perforce
> Have shown to thee such a declining day,
> Or look on thine. We could not stall together
> In the whole world. But yet let me lament,
> With tears as sovereign as the blood of hearts,
> That thou, my brother, my competitor
> In top of all design, my mate in empire,
> Friend and companion in the front of war,
> The arm of mine own body, and the heart
> Where mine his thoughts did kindle – that our stars

Unreconciliable, should divide
Our equalness to this.[8]
(35-48)

There is of course an unmistakeable element of self-aggrandising in this, as Octavius represents Antony as being a kindred spirit as well as his only worthy adversary. To defeat so redoubtable an enemy, who is also in some sense a wayward alter ego to himself, redounds to his own credit both as a warrior and as a future emperor learning to curb the unruly impulses in his own nature. When Cleopatra comes to commemorate Antony, however, it is in wholly different terms, as she focuses her attention on aspects of her lover's character that Octavius has censured as inimical to the Roman spirit:

His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
Crested the world. His voice was propertied
As all the tunèd spheres, and that to friends;
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,
There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas,
That grew the more by reaping. His delights
Were dolphin-like; they showed his back above
The element they lived in. In his livery
Walked crowns and crownets. Realms and islands were
As plates dropped from his pocket.
(5.2.81-91)

Not only does she celebrate the character of Antony in all its multiple facets, but Cleopatra seeks to shape the contours of her own postmortem reputation as well, meticulously orchestrating her suicide so as to thwart Caesar's plan to exhibit her in Rome as a trophy and so subordinate the story of her love for Antony to his self-congratulatory narrative of conquest. She bids her attendants to "Show me . . . like a queen" by decking her out in her "best attires", and envisages herself as being bound "again for Cydnus / To meet Mark Antony" (223-5), before exposing herself to the serpents that will kill her. She is sufficiently successful in this scheme of self-appropriation as to wring an admiring acknowledgment even from Octavius himself that "she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace" (340-2). But such words reflect no more than a momentary yielding on Octavius's part, for while in the concluding speech of the play he does pay reluctant homage to the story of the lovers, he does so in such a way as

[8] See Harry's words in the first part of *Henry IV*: ". . . think not, Percy, / To share with me in glory any more. / Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere, / Nor can one England brook a double reign / Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales" (5.4.62-6).

to make that story an adjunct to his own:

> She shall be buried by her Antony.
> No grave upon the earth shall clip in it
> A pair so famous. High events as these
> Strike those that make them, and their story is
> No less in pity than his glory which
> Brought them to be lamented.
> (552-7)

It is of course an irony of which Octavius cannot be aware as he pronounces these lines that it is himself who plays a subservient part in the story that Shakespeare has woven into the drama of Antony and Cleopatra, and that although it may be he who has the last word in the play it is not in the least the final one.

4.

Obeying the same impulse as that evinced by other Shakespearean characters to construct as positive an image of himself as possible in the final moments of his life, Othello too, belatedly recognising the folly he has fallen into under Iago's malignant influence, delivers himself of a final grandiloquent speech before killing himself. The clear intention of this speech is to present an alternative version of himself to that he knows has been formed in the minds of his auditors, employing much the same strategy of "narrative self-fashioning" that, as Stephen Greenblatt observes (1984, 234), he has used to craft his own identity earlier in the play.[9] To all intents and purposes what he is doing in his final words is dictating a eulogy to his own memory, one that he explicitly demands be committed to writing:

> I pray you, in your letters,
> When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
> Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely but too well,
> Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
> Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
> Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
> Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
> Albeit unusèd to the melting mood,

[9] For the importance of the theme of narrative in this play, see also Bates 1994, Hardy 1997, esp. 58-63, Tsomondo 1999, Macaulay 2005, and Lucking 2020, esp. 68-73.

> Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
> Their medicinal gum. Set you down this
> (5.2.349-60)

While T.S. Eliot is certainly right in asserting that there is an element of aesthetic self-consciousness in this speech which brings its sincerity into doubt (1964, 111), it should be clear at this point that this is a tendency common to many of the pronouncements made by Shakespeare's characters at the moment of death. What Othello's final request amounts to is a last effort to salvage his future reputation by transforming himself from a credulous victim of Iago's machinations and murderer of an innocent woman to an essentially noble individual who, having cast away the pearl he loved not wisely but too well, is now wracked by grief and remorse. What is curious is that notwithstanding the gravity and egregious foolishness of the crime he has committed there are those present at the scene who seem prepared to some extent to acquiesce in his self-evaluation. Cassio rather inconsequentially explains his suicide by saying that he was "great of heart" (371), while Lodovico shifts the onus of blame by telling Iago that "the tragic loading of this bed . . . is thy work" (373-4), thereby kindling at least a suspicion that the process of rehabilitating Othello's memory might already be underway. No more elaborate eulogy is forthcoming in the play, but the information that Lodovico will shortly return to Venice and "to the state / This heavy act with heavy heart relate" (380-1), suggests that the final verdict on the Moor's character is yet to be delivered, though the terms in which it will be formulated remain unknown.

One of the most memorable speeches inspired by the death of a personage in Shakespeare is without question that pronounced by Macbeth when he is apprised of his wife's death. What is particularly worthy of note about this dark soliloquy, however, at least from the perspective of the present discussion, is that it constitutes not so much a eulogy as such than a denial of the possibility of eulogy:

> She should have died hereafter.
> There would have been time for such a word.
> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.
(5.5.16-27)

Macbeth finds himself quite literally at a loss for words precisely at the moment that he has greatest need of them, as he realises not only that he is unable to formulate any kind of meaningful tribute to the memory of his wife, but that the stories in which all lives consist are ultimately barren of significance. Emptied of redeeming narrative possibilities, time itself – the dimension in which all of Macbeth's grandiose ambitions were to be fulfilled – has been reduced to being no more than a tedious concatenation of syllables terminating in silence. Notwithstanding his failure to find a word commensurate with the solemnity of the occasion, however, Macbeth is grimly resolute in his determination not to let others have the last word. As Carmine Di Biase observes, he is propelled into a final contest with Macduff "not by the threat of death but by that of being renamed by his enemy" (2001, 34), the man who is his nemesis confronting him with the intolerable prospect of being stigmatised with the epithet "tyrant" if he allows himself to be captured alive (5.10.27). He is however unsuccessful in this final attempt to escape being defined by others, and the retrospective description of him by the newly acclaimed king of Scotland as a "butcher" allied to a "fiend-like queen" (5.11.35) – words which seem scarcely adequate to define the complex characters we have come to know in the course of the play – illustrates in the most definitive way possible the manner in which the memory of the dead is inexorably subject to the imperatives of the living.

Yet, as we have seen, things can take a different turn, and there are occasions in which even enemies can be recruited into the prevailing value system once they are dead. If Macbeth is goaded into attempting a final trial at arms with Macduff because he refuses to be branded with an epithet he deems derogatory, in *Coriolanus* Martius finds himself in an analogous situation when Aufidius affronts him by addressing him slightingly as "thou boy of tears" (5.6.103). Martius's angry response is to invoke the battle in which he earned the honorary appellation by which he continues to be known in Rome and which gives the play itself its title:

"Boy"! False hound,
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I
Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles.
Alone I did it. "Boy"!
(113-17)

These words represent Martius's last bid to reaffirm the identity he has painstakingly constructed through his military exploits, since Aufidius and his henchmen take this taunt as a provocation to fall upon their old enemy and kill him. Surprisingly, however, and under the circumstances ironically as well, Coriolanus will in fact be remembered in very much the terms in which he has conceived himself. One of the Volscian lords commands that his body be honoured "As the most noble corpse that ever herald / Did follow to his urn" (144-5). And even Aufidius seems to undergo a sudden change of heart:

> My rage is gone,
> And I am struck with sorrow. Take him up.
> Help three o'th' chiefest soldiers; I'll be one.
> Beat thou the drum, that it speak mournfully.
> Trail your steel pikes. Though in this city he
> Hath widowed and unchilded many a one,
> Which to this hour bewail the injury,
> Yet he shall have a noble memory.
> (147-54)

Coriolanus can be mourned even by those who have held him in the greatest detestation because, once again, what is ultimately being celebrated by those obeying its canons is not the memory of any particular person but the martial ethos itself, which transcends the individual to encompass both friend and foe. This is not the case with Macbeth, however much desperate courage he has displayed in the final hours of his life. He has put himself beyond the pale of all communal values, even those founded on the mystique of soldierly valour, and the phrase "dead butcher" is the only epitaph by which he will be remembered.

One final instance of self-fashioning at the point of death remains to be mentioned here, though there are doubtless others that have no less valid a claim to consideration. In *Henry VIII*, the apt alternative title of which is *All Is True*, the former queen Katherine, cast off by Henry and foreseeing as her end approaches that the mechanisms of historical revaluation will not be favourable to her memory, announces that she is entrusting her posthumous reputation to the sole person she believes will treat it with the deference it deserves:

> After my death I wish no other herald,
> No other speaker of my living actions
> To keep mine honour from corruption
> But such an honest chronicler as Griffith.
> (4.2.69-72)

Not content with appointing her own chronicler, Katherine, like Cleopatra before her, goes still further in her effort to mould the image of herself that will be transmitted to posterity, imparting detailed instructions as to the manner in which her body should be exhibited to the public view after her death:

> When I am dead, good wench,
> Let me be used with honour. Strew me over
> With maiden flowers, that all the world may know
> I was a chaste wife to my grave. Embalm me,
> Then lay me forth. Although unqueened, yet like
> A queen and daughter to a king inter me.
> (168-73)

What she is effectively doing at this point is envisioning herself as her own effigy, displayed as an emblem of queenly virtue for all the world to admire. As Nathalie Oziol argues, Katherine "does not just choose the sort of posthumous discourse she would like people to hear; she also builds a real monument for herself in words" (2019, 23). This is an edifice that she hopes will be proof against the shifting sands of history, and that to a certain extent Shakespeare's empathic portrayal contributes to shoring up as well.

5.

"After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live", Hamlet facetiously remarks in connection with the influence that actors can exert on public opinion (2.2.528-9). As Mark Antony intimates at the beginning of his funeral oration, however, ill reports have an unfortunate habit of outliving those they concern, and not uncommonly become inscribed in bad epitaphs as well. That one's memory might be immutably fixed in what Belarius in *Cymbeline* describes as a "sland'rous epitaph", notwithstanding whatever "fair act" may have been performed in life (3.3.52-3), is a dread evinced by numerous characters in Shakespeare. It is a fear that can only be exorcised, or at least mitigated, by the hope that the custodian of one's posthumous reputation will prove to be a sympathetic one. It is presumably with an eye to his own future reputation that Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, believing that he is about to die by Shylock's hand, urges Bassanio to refrain from taking any further action to defend him on the grounds that that "You cannot better be employed, Bassanio, / Than to live still and write mine epitaph" (4.1.116-17). This is the aspiration overtly expressed by characters as diverse as Hamlet and Othello and Katherine, as well as implicitly conveyed by other characters who have been discussed in the foregoing pages. It is only by finding what

Katherine describes as an "honest chronicler", one willing to treat their memories with no bias other than the respect and comprehension they feel is their due, that is it possible for these personages to safeguard the dignity of their reputations in the eyes of those that come after them, and indeed to ensure that their reputations survive at all.

Yet identifying such a chronicler, one who does not have personal axes to grind or partisan interests to promote, is not a straightforward process, as the instance of Shakespeare's own assumption of a role very similar to this perhaps illustrates. In those of his sonnets dealing with that particular kind of immortality to be attained through the mediation of art, it is to himself in his capacity as poet that Shakespeare attributes the function of perpetuating the memory of the young man he is nominally addressing. A particularly noteworthy case in point is a sonnet that opens, sombrely enough, with an allusion to an epitaph that is yet to be written:

> Or I shall live your epitaph to make,
> Or you survive when I in earth am rotten.
> From hence your memory death cannot take,
> Although in me each part will be forgotten.
> Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
> Though I, once gone, to all the world must die.
> The earth can yield me but a common grave
> When you entombèd in men's eyes shall lie.
> Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
> Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,
> And tongues to be your being shall rehearse
> When all the breathers of this world are dead.
> You still shall live – such virtue hath my pen –
> Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.
> (Sonnet 81)

Whether or not he lives long enough to write the young man's epitaph, the poet is saying, it will be his verse that supplies the monument in which the memory of his friend will be preserved for future generations, conferring upon him the closest thing that human existence affords to eternal life. From the perspective of the person who is the object of such solicitude this might seem gratifying enough, but in view of what occurs in those works by Shakespeare in which the posthumous memory of a character is enlisted into the service of exigencies other than their own it is perhaps to be wondered whether this poem too might not come with a sting in its tail. Shakespeare may have been perfectly sincere in his desire to erect a monument in words to the person he is addressing. But he must also have been aware even while penning this sonnet that the principal beneficiary

of his imaginative labours was not at all the individual ostensibly being referred to, that it is not so much the immortality of the young man he was ensuring through such confident affirmations of the eternising power of art as his own.

Works Cited

Bate, Jonathan. 1997. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. London: Picador.

Bates, Catherine. 1994. "Weaving and Writing in *Othello*". *Shakespeare Survey Volume 46: Shakespeare and Sexuality*, edited by Stanley Wells, 51-60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bell, Millicent. 2002. *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bloom, Harold. 1999. *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*. London: Fourth Estate.

Di Biase, Carmine G. 2001. "'I am as I have spoken': the Act of Naming in *Macbeth*". *Renaissance and Reformation* 25: 23-44.

Dolan Frances E. 1994. "'Gentlemen, I Have One Thing More to Say': Women on Scaffolds in England, 1563-1680". *Modern Philology* 92 (2): 157-78.

Eliot, T.S. 1964. *Selected Essays: New Edition*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.

Fahmi, Mustapha. 2010. "Quoting the Enemy: Character, Self-Interpretation, and the Question of Perspective in Shakespeare". In *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*, edited by Michael D. Bristol, 129-41. London: Continuum Books.

Fortin, Rene E. 1968. "*Julius Caesar*: An Experiment in Point of View". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 19 (4): 341-7.

Freedman, Barbara. 1991. *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Goddard, Harold. 1960. *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Greenblatt, Stephen. 1984. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Greene, Gayle. 1980. "'The power of speech / To stir men's blood': the Language of Tragedy in Shakespeare's J*ulius Caesar*". *Renaissance Drama* 11: 67-93.

Hardy, Barbara. 1997. *Shakespeare's Storytellers: Dramatic Narration*. London: Peter Owen.

Kinney, Arthur F. 2002. "Hamlet's Narratives". In *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare's Hamlet*, edited by Bernice W. Kliman, 90-4. New York: Modern Language Association of America.

Lucking, David. 2020. "To Tell Whose Story?: Narrative Identity and its Discontents in Shakespeare". *Fictions: Studi sulla narratività* 19: 45-59.

— 2016. "First and Final Things: Shakespeare's Sonnet 145, and his Epitaph". *Lingue e Linguaggi* 19: 221-33 (Accessed 26 September 2024).

Macaulay, Marcia. 2005. "When Chaos Is Come Again: Narrative and Narrative Analysis in Othello". *Style* 39: 259-76.

Newstok, Scott L. 2009. *Quoting Death in Early Modern England: the Poetics of Epi-*

taphs Beyond the Tomb. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Oziol, Nathalie. 2019. "Death Sentences in Shakespearean Deathbed Scenes: the Cases of *2 Henry 6* and *Henry 8*". *Arrêt sur scène / Scene Focus* 08/2019 (Accessed 26 September 2024).
Shakespeare, William. 2006. *The Oxford Shakespeare. Complete Works*. Edited by Stanley Wells, and Gary Taylor. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sharpe, J.A. 1985. "'Last Dying Speeches': Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England". *Past and Present* 107: 144-67.
Sherlock, Peter. 2008. *Monuments and Memory in Early Modern England*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
Tsomondo, Thorell Porter. 1999. "Stage-Managing 'Otherness': The Function of Narrative in *Othello*". *Mosaic* 32: 1-25.
Whitver, H. Austin. 2023. *Tombs in Shakespearean Drama: Monumental Theater*. New York: Routledge.
Willbern, David. 2005. "Constructing Caesar: a Psychoanalytic Reading". In *Julius Caesar: New Critical Essays*, edited by Horst Zander, 213-26. New York: Routledge.
Williams, Claire Bryony. 2014. "Manuscript, Monument, Memory: the Circulation of Epitaphs in the 17th Century". *Literature Compass* 11 (8): 573-82.
Wunderli, Richard and Gerald Broce. 1989. "The Final Moment before Death in Early Modern England". *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 20 (2): 259-75.
Yu, Jeffrey J. 2007. "Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Erasmus's *De Copia*, and Sentential Ambiguity". *Comparative Drama* 41 (1): 79-106.