The Contribution of the Theatrical Medium

Theatre as a medium is a specially suitable channel for conveying an impression of truth. In many ways, therefore, writing for the theatre helped Shakespeare to authenticate his historical fictions. In performance, historical plays provide a peculiar historical experience, entirely different from the one provided by the reading of history books, since in the theatrical situation έλεος and φόβος, pity and fear, are things that happen in the here and now, and are simultaneously and collectively experienced. The theatrical medium, then, while imposing restrictions, allows opportunities that are unknown to the narrational medium: while a narrator will have to state and argue the truth of the facts reported, a dramatist can rely on the reality effect of the performance to induce belief in the truth of what is represented.1

Generally speaking, therefore, the dramatist has a better chance of inducing belief in the reality and truth of a story than the historian. This is in part what Nashe meant when he compared the ‘worm-eaten books’ of chronicles to the live re-enactment of things past on the stage. But there is more to this than what Nashe was affirming in defence of historical drama. One of the genre assumptions of theatre, in fact, is that of possessing the same truth status as we attribute to history in the sense of res gestae without the mediation of the historia rerum gestarum, because the representation of an event on the stage coincides with the event; in the theatrical situation, in fact, what is represented on the stage is by itself both memorable and true, two qualities that the theatrical event shares with a certain conceptualisation of historical events.2 It is, then, the representation itself that sanctions the event and that furthers its claim to be kept in the audience’s memory. What the staging of an event produces

P. Pugliatti, *Shakespeare the Historian*
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is, therefore, a strong, though implicit, sanction of the truth of the acts performed before our eyes.

The difference in perception between reading a story and watching a staged play also resides in the more concrete, and therefore more direct, way in which the theatre enables us to apprehend time and time sequences. In the theatrical situation, the illusion of dominating the events derives in part from our tendency to associate time with space: when we watch a play, unlike what happens when we read a tale, we feel that time is not somewhere else; rather, we perceive it as accessible because it develops in praesentia, even though unity of time is not respected. In other words, a staged play produces a restricted spatial experience where the category of time is almost literally ‘seen’, in the same way that the objects are seen in the restricted and controllable space of the stage. What, therefore, in written narratives is a temporal ‘elsewhere’ of which we only know that it was but not where it was, is apprehended empirically and simultaneously within the limited compass of the stage.3

In his Apology for Actors Heywood, too, insisted on the incomparable reality effect of theatrical representations, and in particular on their suitability to induce behaviour, especially when they show historical characters and events. After remarking that ‘Oratory is a kind of a speaking picture’, that ‘Painting likewise, is a dumbe oratory’, that ‘A Description is only a shadow receiued by the eare but not perceiued by the eye’, that ‘so liuely portrature is meerely a forme seene by the eye, but can neither shew action, passion, motion, or any other gesture’, he contrasts these with theatrical representations, saying that ‘to see a souldier shap’d like a souldier, walke, speake, act like a souldier: to see a Hector all besmered in blood, trampling upon the bulkes of Kinges. A Troylus returning from the field in the sight of his father Priam... Oh these were sights to make an Alexander.’4

Shakespeare was certainly aware of these potentialities of the theatrical medium, although there are moments when he felt the need to stress them, in order to enhance belief in the truth of the world represented. In the Prologue to Henry VIII (whose subtitle bears the promise that All Is True), the authenticity of the story that is going to develop before the eyes of the spectators is repeatedly stressed, and culminates with an invitation to the audience to enter the world of the play with full confidence: