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*From the Classics to the Italian World:
Elizabethan Essays*

Stephen Orgel

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(Cesare Ripa, *Allegory of the Printing Press*, 1645)

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For
Loretta Innocenti

Introduction

The essays collected here span a fifty year period. The earliest, “The Poetics of Spectacle”, was written as a lecture for the University of Virginia, and became the Introduction to my *Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court* (1973), a collaboration with the historian Roy Strong. It was designed to counteract the prevailing critical assumption that court masques were “mere spectacle”, and thus were not to be taken seriously. In Renaissance England court masques were highly charged political and cultural statements, and there was nothing “mere” about court spectacle.

My early work was on Ben Jonson and court theatre, and I resisted the pressure, quite strong in those days (and even stronger now) to concentrate on Shakespeare. But in the university Shakespeare was what needed to be taught, typically the only literature course that non-majors would enroll in. In view of the overwhelming concentration on Shakespeare, it is difficult to take into account that he was not a literary pundit but, first of all, a popular dramatist. As a literary writer he was best known in his own time as the poet of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both of which went through many more editions than any of the plays. The plays only became literature when they became books, most notably with the publication of the first folio in 1623, long after Shakespeare’s death. This in effect turned Shakespeare into an English classic, and the plays – and even more the playwright – had to be continually revised to maintain this status; hence the common claim now that Shakespeare must always, really, have been writing for publication. Didn’t he really always think of himself as a poet? But the answer to this is no: when he thought of himself as a poet, he wrote quite differently – and despite their popularity in his own time, the poems over the centuries have elicited relatively little critical interest.

Plays are very different from books, and transforming the text of a play into a book was not a straightforward process, and was clearly, in Shakespeare's case, not the work of the playwright. A script is a set of instructions for performance – this term for the text of a play supplied to the actors apparently dates only from the late nineteenth century; it also implies that the work is written by hand. Nevertheless, turning the script into a performance involves not simply following instructions, but supplying a good deal of both action and interpretation – any play, by the time it reaches the stage, is a profoundly collaborative enterprise. Turning the play then into a reading text, a legible narrative, requires even more rethinking. A great deal of information is required in a narrative, ranging from the most basic, such as the characters' names, to very complex stage directions. Consider, for example, the king in *Hamlet*. Modern texts invariably call him Claudius, but his name is never mentioned in the play – in performance he is only the King. The name Claudius appears just twice in the second quarto text and once in the folio, in a single stage direction for his first entrance: “*Enter Claudius King of Denmarke*”; in Q2 this is immediately followed by the speech heading *CLAUD.* In the folio the speech heading is simply *KING.* Why is he named Claudius, then; for whose benefit is the name included? The answer can only be, for Shakespeare's. It is, then, not an element of performance, but part of the creative process, and it eventually became part of the reading process. And the dumb show preceding the play within the play, a long and complex action, is represented in the book only as a long stage direction.

It is easy to show how different the texts of Shakespeare that have come down to us must be from what was presented on the popular stage. To begin with, they are, with a small number of exceptions, much too long, and would have been cut for performance, as the published texts regularly still are today. But they also would have undergone a good deal of rewriting, to turn them from acting scripts to literary texts – thus the second quarto of *Hamlet* declares on its title page that the book contains much more than the previous quarto, which is the right length (and has the appropriate stage directions) for what was performed. The publisher Humphrey Moseley, issuing a collection of the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher in 1647, declares that the volume includes “All that was *Acted*,

and all that was not; even the perfect full Originalls without the least mutilation” (1647, A4v). For this literary editor, performance mutilated the play, which was whole only in the authors’ originals.

Ben Jonson took charge of the transformation of his plays into books, and added a good deal of material in the process. When, in his mid-forties, he produced his *Workes* in folio (1616) he was in effect declaring himself a classic author while he was still alive. Most folio *Works* were historical, philosophical, or scientific, and the authors were long dead. Even the early quartos of Jonson’s plays look like editions of the classics, divided into acts and scenes, and with a good deal of paratextual material. The title page of Jonson’s earliest quarto, *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1600), declares that it includes “more than hath been Publickely Spoken or Acted. With the severall Character of every Person” – there is a great deal more to the play in this form than you could experience in the theater. The book enabled Jonson to keep control of the play, as he could not do in the theater, extending the action, giving instructions for interpretation, managing the reader as he could not manage the actors.

Much in Jonson’s printed texts, moreover, is addressed solely to readers: in addition to the numerous congratulatory poems prefacing the play quartos, from Jonson’s own pen there are the extensive character sketches in the *dramatis personae* of *Every Man Out of His Humour*, the prefatory “needfull notes” and marginal citation of sources in *Sejanus*, the addresses to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in *Volpone* and to readers of *The Alchemist* urging them to be “understanders”, the two epistles in *Catiline* “To the Reader in Ordinarie” and “To the Reader extraordinary” – Jonson, of course, conceives the latter to be his true audience. Perhaps most striking are the acrostic titles prefaced to *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, which show Jonson being playful in a way that could only be manifest in writing, and that, moreover, was not manifest when the book was read aloud. As “more than hath been Publickely Spoken or Acted” reveals, the printed texts contain much that was not included in the play in the theater – how much there is no way of knowing, but anyone who has worked on a production of a Jonson play knows how much cutting is required to return it to the stage. That is true of the surviving texts of Shakespeare plays too, as it must be of any play revised for publication where all that has survived is the published version.

In fact, the exclusive attention to Shakespeare, even among admirers of English Renaissance drama, is a relatively modern phenomenon. The first academic courses in Shakespeare were taught not in Britain, but at Harvard, as late as the 1870s. Oxford and Cambridge taught medieval literature, but it was assumed that students could read anything written later for themselves. Clearly this is wrong; there is a lot to learn. But in fact, to focus exclusively on Shakespeare, and moreover, in a modernized form, is to ignore what is most distinctive about the Elizabethan world, and that world was very different from ours. Therefore this is not a book of essays exclusively about Shakespeare. In so far as it deals with his work, it is about Shakespeare within the culture that produced him and in which he thrived. That world was unfamiliar and even frightening: witchcraft and the supernatural were treated not simply as poetic fancies but as facts of nature, religion was a pervasive and all too often literally a burning issue, the social hierarchy was everywhere visible and violations of it had real consequences, women were property and romance was rarely a feature of marriage. It was a world that few modern readers of Shakespeare would recognize or could imagine themselves in.

As is inevitable in any collection spanning a lifetime, there is a certain amount of repetition here. I have not revised these passages, nor edited them out.

A Note on Quotations

In quotations, u, v, i, j, and w have been normalised, and contractions have been expanded; otherwise, quotations are given as they appear in the editions cited. In the case of early books that do not include page numbers, citations are for the most part to signature numbers. Signatures are the marks placed by the printer at the beginning of each gathering, or section, to show how the book is organised. The marks are usually letters or combinations of letters, but they may also be symbols, such as asterisks or pilcrows.

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