Shadow Soldiers and Precarious Unions: The Legacies of Shakespeare’s History Play

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Shadow Soldiers and Precarious Unions:
The Legacies of Shakespeare’s History Play

[The following address was written for a celebratory event and delivered on 26 April 2014 at the “Shakespeare Feiern/Celebrating Shakespeare” conference of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft. I have chosen to publish it in talk format, albeit with some elaborations to the argument as well as the addition of scholarly citations. My hope is that the rhetorical differences from most scholarly articles will themselves recall and memorialize that special occasion, as well as serving as a reminder of the fleeting, contingent aspects of historical commemoration which are among the talk’s objects of inquiry.]

This is an occasion for both celebration and retrospection, as we acknowledge Shakespeare’s 450th birthday week and the 150th anniversary of the oldest Shakespeare society in the world. Having just served as President of America’s Johnny-Come-Lately version — only 42 years old—I have enjoyed witnessing the surprise this chronology causes for most non-Shakespeareans in the US, who presume that if anyone got a headstart on us in establishing such an organization, it must have been the Brits. So it has already been a treat for me to say I am speaking here today. I thank you for your precedent as well as your hospitality.

When your President Tobías Döring asked me to speak about Shakespeare’s histories at this celebration, he knew that I have spent a goodly amount of time with those plays focused on English monarchs called the Histories in the table of contents of the First Folio. For another day, or at least the question-and-answer period, is the issue of Heminge and Condell’s rationale for that particular generic grouping in the Folio, with its exclusions even of other tales from the British Isles, not to mention Shakespeare’s complex historical meditations on far more consequential rulers of Rome and Egypt. Taking the categorization as a Jacobean fact, then, it is true that I have written about the Histories, especially those which modern scholars have come to call Shakespeare’s
“mature” histories: variously dubbed the Henry plays, the epic “Henriad,” and the Lancastrian or the second tetralogy. That is, second in composition though first in the order of historical events being narrated—an obvious yet notable instance of the literary author trumping historical representation as what really matters to those defining the categories.

But here’s the rub. In the land of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Benjamin and Arendt, I cannot tell you anything about theories of history and historicism that you do not already know—or at least anything you haven’t heard before. And in a country that has produced some of the boldest theatrical reconceptions of Shakespeare, and whose New Art Gallery in Berlin (for example) includes works by the remarkable Anselm Kiefer among many, many other contemporary artists reflecting on the complexities of historical memory, I cannot hope to outshine the vividness of their illustrations. If there is cause for celebration today, then, perhaps it lies in this very fact of Germany’s rich recent achievements in exploring the meanings of history.

In addition, one of the great honors for me in participating in European gatherings of Shakespeareans over the past decade has been learning rather than teaching, as the variety of perspectives that comes through geographical and national translation has been a source of great growth and dynamism in our field. At conferences that began with the acronym SHINE before being transformed into meetings of ESRA, I witnessed Europeans collectively grappling with their own precarious union—I mean by that the EU—as well as facing the individual challenge of sometimes being one of very few Shakespeare scholars at their home institutions, in their land, or in their language: this produces significantly different relationships to the works than I have experienced, being part of the Anglo-American tradition. So the last thing I want to do when in Europe is perpetuate the American stereotype of arrogantly assuming we’ve solved the big problems and are ready to export our solutions.

With these caveats in mind, then, I offer a few examples—not new historicist anecdotes but simple examples—that connect issues of historical memory with issues that arise in
studying Shakespeare’s histories, as a prelude to a dialogue among us, without the presumption of thinking you have read my scholarship in print. In doing so, I hope to make evident what I think are some of the challenges humanities scholarship faces at this historical moment, and why our methods matter.

And speaking of methods: I have shunned the current multimedia lecture norms of today as a small gesture at imagining, if not that world of 450 years ago when so much was learned by hearing alone, then at least the conventions of how learning occurred 150 years past, when your Shakespeare Society began. I am thus, without apology, asking that you continue to lend me your ears, as I turn to the shadow soldiers of my title.

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This month of special celebrations around Shakespeare’s birthday began with coverage in the New York Times of a line of poetry drawn from another literary giant, Virgil, used for purposes of commemoration. In a manner familiar to Shakespeareans, the quotation had been entirely decontextualized, wrenched from its narrative context, letting the authorial name alone signal its gravitas. Its location is the National September 11th Memorial Museum at the site of New York’s World Trade Center, on a wall separating visitors, the Times reports, “from a repository containing about 8,000 unidentified human remains” from the 2001 disaster. “On the wall is a 60-foot-long inscription, in 15-inch letters made from the steel of the twin towers [reading]: ‘No day shall erase you from the memory of time. Virgil.’” The problem, as the reporter David W. Dunlap points out, is with the “you” Virgil was originally addressing when he wrote “No day shall erase you from the memory of time”—in Latin, of course, within the context of what we call Book 9 of the Aeneid. I quote Dunlap at length:

“You” are not nameless. You are Nisus and Euryalus.
“You” do not number in the thousands. You are two.
“You” are not civilians. You are Trojan soldiers.
“You” have not been thrown together by cruel chance. You are a loving pair.
Your deaths are not unprovoked. You have just slaughtered the enemy in an orgy of violence, skewering soldiers whom you ambushed in their sleep. For this, the enemy has killed you and impaled your heads on spears.
Clearly, “you” does not fit the profile of Sept. 11 victims. One might charitably assume that the museum’s leadership did not understand the ironic disconnection between the literary quotation and the occasion being commemorated, but this is not the case: over three years prior, classicists had pointed out its inappropriateness. The sole result was that the Museum removed the *Aeneid* as the work being cited, leaving only the name of the author, Virgil. Moreover, the de-narrativized quotation will not only mark the site of a very different atrocity than those carried out by either the Trojan duo or their ancient Italian foes but will also be available in the Museum’s gift shop on souvenir keychains [*Image 1*], where even Virgil’s name is effaced in favor of that all-purpose, portable “you”: “No day shall erase you from the memory of time.” Except that, in this very act of de-specified commemoration, compounded by the material artifacts over which the steel inscription presides being unidentified human fragments, the “you” has been erased—and the Virgilian “you” is gone as well. All that is left is a hauntingly emptied version of a sympathy card’s message.

With all the language in the world, what was it that made the 9/11 Museum foundation stick to this choice in the face of criticism for insensitivity, accusations of inadequate citation, and more? Why didn’t they take the scholars’ clear and evidence-based objections to heart? What exactly was being commemorated, and now marketed as well, that made it seem important to cling to a martial Virgilian quotation rather than, say, one of so many Shakespearean moments of grief, love, and mourning?

As a scholar, I find it easy enough, indeed natural by now, to ask such questions, and to perform a critique of the museum’s usage of words disconnected from history—and yet it might be more productive for a moment to appreciate the museum curator’s position. She or he needs consoling words to comfort those witnessing the remains of an overwhelming number of individually senseless deaths. Turning to an ancient author reminds us that some human achievements have survived the ravages of time and mortality: not those of the shadowy soldiers, but in this instance the poetic act of commemoration itself, creating beauty and meaning out of irredeemable horror and suffering. The persistence of the authorial name as a sign of lasting witness, shored up by the work of many unnamed and
unnamed collaborators—the translators, preservationists, collectors and editors—more than the (likely false) presumption of a shared sensibility across the centuries provides perhaps the only uncontestable source of consolation and hope in the face of wanton human destructiveness and hate. “Virgil” is indeed the key word in—if not on—the chain.

Arguably, a similar logic applies to commemorative citations from Shakespeare, who seldom provides a direct or easy source of Hallmark-style sympathy. In other words, given the curator’s mission, we might want to query my assumption above: do Shakespeare’s words, any more than Virgil’s Aeneid, provide immediate solace—even when detached from the narrative? I would say not often in themselves, but that the combination of performance with text allows a more complex range of multimedia messages and ways to create chains of continuity and memory. In the theater, most notably, live performance allows the embodied resurrection of known historical figures through characterization, allowing not only the authorial name but also the actors’ bodies and voices to speak as those figures’ as well as our surrogates, eliding past and present. And as they do, they provide audiences with an imaginative space in which to both recall and come to terms with pride, loss, and grieving across time. But seldom can the complexity of this experience be translated into a shared rather than individualized form of commemoration, any more than it can be tied to the specificity of a particular line or phrase.

I think, for instance, about Hotspur’s widow Lady Percy grieving in Henry IV, Part 2, and with her speech a still-haunting theatrical image from a decade ago, when New York’s Lincoln Center produced the two parts of Henry IV truncated into a single evening divided by two intermissions. The production was lauded in the press primarily as the occasion when Kevin Kline played Falstaff (that potent symbol, as we have learned from Ewan Fernie, of world liberty). For me, however, the most moving scene occurred when the dead soldiers of Shrewsbury—the battle which had provided the climactic ending of the production’s part one, and whose bodies reappeared strewn across the stage when we
returned from the interval—rose up, as a ghostly group, and moved slowly offstage away from the living.

This stage action followed directly upon Audra MacDonald’s major speech as Lady Percy, in which she persuades Northumberland not to fight in the current rebellion. Her logic is that since he had failed to do so at the moment that could have saved his own valiant and extraordinary son Hotspur, it would now demean that sacrifice to assist others instead. She mourns:

He was so suffered; so came I a widow,
And never shall have length of life enough
To rain upon remembrance with mine eyes,
That it may grow and sprout as high as heaven,
For recordation to my noble husband.  

In making her plea, Lady Percy does the only thing she can to make her loss meaningful: to emphasize remembrance of Hotspur’s singularity, and their personal story, prioritizing it over the claims of political factions and whatever at least nominal causes beyond his honor had prompted the battle in the first place—and according to the historical record, there were several. In her speech, there are no large causes or just wars, just one exceptionally noble husband lost.

And this is typical of Shakespeare’s mourning wives and mothers. Lady Percy’s grief is hers alone…for him alone. History thus personalized, “characterized” in two senses of the word, would hardly be even as appropriate as Virgil’s line in providing consolation for thousands lost. The form may resemble, the image of tears as rain to nourish perpetual “remembrance” may evoke, the familiar structure of grieving for its auditors—but the message itself stresses Hotspur’s singularity, and thus her exceptionality as well. Instead of working through direct translation of its message to other circumstances, that is, Shakespeare’s speech works—if it works—through our ability to empathize with, or alternatively to criticize, this speaker’s particular position. Of course, during the performance we may not even be aware of these fine distinctions. At the New York production, McDonald’s passionate rendition forced my empathy in the moment, and
only later, looking back at the speech that she had made memorable through feeling, did I examine as a scholar the specificity of her words.

In that difference, I think, lies much of the reason why both the experiences of witnessing and analyzing have value, but also why much of our careful scholarship is hard for general audiences to take on board, or even wish to hear. Such scholarship, like the Wooster Group’s analytic mode of theatricality discussed at this conference by Stephen Purcell, displaces the more comforting, and often deeply desirable, ability to form an immediate if precarious union with another person across time, place, and the counterevidence of the factual—which is the more typical communal work of historical plays in performance. Within the theater, the actor’s forcefully embodied expression of sadness or indeed happiness—for “whatever”—will, for one brief shining moment, suffice.

Yet what I loved about that particular New York staging was its simultaneous reminder through visualization of another, more resonant communal truth of battle, as counterpoint to MacDonald’s passionate speech. As part of her lengthy complaint on behalf of Hotspur’s honor, her Kate had implored

> Never, O, never, do his ghost the wrong
> To hold your honour more precise and nice
> With others than with him. Let them alone.  (2.3.39-41)

Nevertheless, even as her words “new lamenting ancient oversights” (2.3.48) moved Northumberland to flee to Scotland—and that abandonment of his fellow soldiers was made far more memorable by the actors embodying the dead silently arising, only to depart—Hotspur became but one among the ghostly many, not alone. Kate’s singular grief persisted, as her arms reached out in longing toward her departing husband. But his individuality, his distinction, was effaced by the collective movement of which he was now quite literally a part. Of course, this silent counterpoint was entirely a modern directorial creation by Jack O’Brien. It added topical poignancy to Shakespeare’s words as well, although they spoke of no such thing: being performed as many young Americans were dying in Iraq for reasons as convoluted as any in Shakespeare’s histories,
the audience could not help but register the pain of such a mass exit. Like Virgil’s verse without his story, such modern performative collaborations with the great authors keep the earlier texts vital, seemingly prescient and wise beyond their own imagining.

Even here, I find ironies worth noting. The death of those foot soldiers, whose real-life correlates the American media have now for over a decade routinely dubbed “fallen heroes,” remained the exclusive focus, their bravery and sacrifice the thing that was valued in itself; no connection was made with their leader’s or our nation’s reasons for employing them in systematic murder to achieve something seemingly larger than one man’s valor. And so, given that the production was occurring during both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, it, like the Virgil quotation, displaced victimized civilians (including those within Shakespeare’s fiction such as Lady Northumberland, Hotspur’s mother) with attention to those shadow soldiers—shadows in all Shakespeare’s many senses of that word: actors, ghosts, and dark reflections of a grimly material substance.10

As a scholar describing theatrical experience, I again slide toward critique rather than appreciation alone, as much as I often wish I could end at the simply moving or celebratory pronouncement: the recalcitrant facts and the ethical urgency of the dramatic performance in the here-and-now makes such critique necessary, I would argue, especially when the genre is the historical, and militarism is at the only slightly submerged core of the work’s seductive emotional power. Shakespeare as an historical playwright obviously cannot be held accountable for what we moderns do with his stories and words, yet it is also true that the parts of the stories we turn to repeatedly are those that either personalize the conflicts or are more the effect of our performance histories than his words.

Here is where the “history” and “play” of my title come into conflict. I suspect we all prefer Hal and Falstaff playing pranks and playing king rather than recalling Rumour’s shadowy warnings about historical narrative’s unreliability and self-interest at the start of Henry IV, Part 2—even though just 11 days ago on the first anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings, one television news reporter said truly of the ongoing violence in
Ukraine that “one of the greatest dangers here is that rumor or misinformation can trigger events.” Indeed. That’s the historical insight—but it isn’t the locus of the fun.

Nor is every day a holiday, despite Falstaff’s attempts to make it so and Hal’s more complex mixture of playful and serious performance. So although I do enjoy Hal’s antics and King Harry’s oratory, and while I would prefer to celebrate the portable quotations and misquotations—the better part of valour is discretion, after all—I still find myself drawn repeatedly to write about the more disturbing elements of Shakespeare’s histories and their legacies in performance, be it the unheroically effective rhetorical traps Prince John lays for the rebels at Gaultree Forest in *Henry IV, Part 2*, or the reassignment of a marginalized Queen’s words to a saintly Paul Scofield in Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V*—a film I nevertheless admire, by an actor/director I will be delighted to celebrate here in Weimar. Likewise, I feel compelled to point out that when Shakespeare made Hotspur a generation younger than his historical original, and had his uncle Worcester withhold the option of a more honorable single combat in order to save the older generation’s skin, *Henry IV, Part 1* itself provided an opportunity (not taken in the performance I have described) to highlight the cruel duping of young soldiers by their elders now, rather than emphasizing only the poignance of their honorable deaths.

Still harping on topical resonance and off-stage events, rather than letting the play(ing) be the thing? So say many of my actor and theatergoing friends, eager for entertainment and communion—both of course worthy goals. And so, I do want to acknowledge that there is another dimension to this scholarly enterprise; moreover, this dimension needs special attention at our present moment, when the humanities are under attack in many quarters as being less “useful” or positively productive than are the social or natural sciences. So let me turn to a second public institution’s use of words and an historical event from Shakespeare’s own lifetime, which has been used to celebrate my other titular emphasis, on precarious unions.

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The event was the attempted bombing of Parliament by Guy Fawkes and company, and the way in which their foiled conspiracy became incorporated into a redemptive narrative
of English providential history. The date of Fawkes’ discovery with his casks of
gunpowder in the undercroft of the House of Lords swiftly became the stuff of legend,
including that memorable rhyme: “Remember, remember the fifth of November.” And
so we do—at least those in Britain and the lands it colonized, with "a penny for the guy"
and Bonfire Day burnings of Fawkes in effigy. But who recalls his fellow Gunpowder
Plot conspirators Thomas and Robert Winter, Robert Catesby, Christopher or John
Wright—or that Bates or Percy, as distinct from the Bates of the campfire scene in Henry
V or the dashing Percy I’ve been discussing (whom Shakespeare also made younger so
that he could go mano-a-mano with a triumphant Prince Hal in the seemingly
providential pseudo-duel concluding Henry IV, Part 1)? In a contrast to the 9/11
Museum’s example, the British National Portrait Gallery’s souvenir mug does recall the
other Gunpowder Plot members who were part of current events in 1605, reproducing a
contemporary woodcut of the group that identifies each conspirator by name and face
[Image 2].

Moreover, it even labels Guy "Guido Fawkes"—a renaming that at first blush might seem
typical of early modern British xenophobia but was in fact the Italianate name Fawkes
himself adopted while serving with the Spanish in the Netherlands, in an Italian/Spanish
conflation worthy of Shakespeare’s Iago. The difference in the two museums’ marketing
of memorabilia may be attributable more to the artifacts each has to display rather than
greater interest per se in the accurate recovery of historical specifics—that is, the Portrait
Gallery’s mug displays the woodcut image of the conspirators on view within its
(remarkable) collection. Nonetheless, this version of branding does recall the facts of the
conspiracy as they were produced in Shakespeare’s own time, reminding us that what
might well have also been a propagandistic attempt to make the discovered Englishman
Fawkes seem foreign was still an accurate reflection of his own agency.

If one asks most members of the public under 40 about Guy Fawkes, however, they are
less likely to recognize this woodcut or mug than they are to know the mask that was
used in the 1980s DC Comics “Vertigo” series, V for Vendetta— which has more
recently become a global symbol of mass resistance. V for Vendetta was itself an
extension of an earlier cartoon strip included with other stories under the rubric *Warrior* (oops! there are those shadow soldiers again...). During this millennium, the Guy Fawkes mask was first associated with the Occupy Wall Street protests and was subsequently employed by a wide array of protest movements, in which the participants have felt they needed to or chose to hide their individual identities; these include the many Egyptian protests that continue during the chilly aftermath to the Arab Spring. The 2005 film version of *V for Vendetta*, which prompted the mask’s widespread use, actually cited the Gunpowder Plot rhyme in its fuller form:

> Remember, remember the Fifth of November:  
> the gunpowder treason and plot.  
> I know of no reason why the gunpowder treason 
> should ever be forgot.

But remembering or forgetting is too simple a dichotomy for what transpires in this series. Within *V for Vendetta*’s post-nuclear war England, V, the wounded victim of a fascist state, engages in terrorism against that state and, before he is killed, tells a crowd of Londoners to “choose what comes next. Lives of your own, or a return to chains.”13 Thus the Roman numeral V, or five, which might have begun life associated with the Jacobean government’s mandate that bonfires of celebration be lit on the very evening of November 5, 1605, is repurposed by writer Alan Moore to stand for nameless victim #5 of the imagined state’s drug experimentation upon its own citizens, and from there morphs into the victim’s own adoption of the V both as protection and the letter of vengeance, vigilantism and vendetta—that last word added later in the cartoon sequence, reportedly after *Warrior* publisher Dez Skinn worried that it would sound, like Guido Fawkes, too Italianate.14 One cannot make these things up: the chains of association, remediation, marketing and repurposing are precisely what has undermined and transformed the original Jacobean state’s creation of Guy Fawkes as the demonic, terrorist other. Precarious unions indeed.

I confess that when I first learned of the Guy Fawkes mask’s cross-cultural pop adoption, the historicist in me intuitively cringed; but the more I looked into this sequence of retelling, the better the story got. To lament rather than celebrate this “repurposing” of Guy Fawkes, I would posit, is actually to miss a chance to see how it forces us to reread
against the grain of our own inherited understanding of the facts—the facts which were always already invested in an exclusively British form of providential history, a state of exceptionalism that led eventually to the Thatcherite state which in turn proved more enduring than the comic book creator of anarchist opposition to it could himself conceive. Nor could he or the visual artist David Lloyd imagine that their mask for V would become an internationally significant symbol of protest—though this last vertiginous transformation has reportedly pleased them both.\textsuperscript{15} I surmise it might have pleased Shakespeare as well.

For this is the creative side of how history gets used and rewritten: the facts are reimagined in the service of new stories, and there is little purpose in protesting \textit{that} reality. It is in just this way that Shakespeare’s histories too can and need to be understood, and examined locally rather than globally, or rather, as locally meaningful within a vast and complicated global network of dynamic change, in order for us to understand their enduring appeal.

I am reminded as I think of Bonfire Day, for example, of the possibility that St Crispin’s Day—traditionally a shoemaker’s holiday when bonfires were lit—was already an occasion receding with the Catholic past when Shakespeare had his Henry V choose to invoke it, in the service of his most famous oration on war and memory. Or did Guy Fawkes so soon on the date’s heels, along with the Lord Mayor’s Show, help to supplant the saint with the state? Here I hope some present scholar might help me. If St Hugh had already displaced the twins Crispin and Crispianus in the London imaginary, the author would have known the irony of using a fading saint’s day, even if victory at Agincourt itself \textit{was} very much part of his own time’s history, or mythistory—\textit{to} use that more capacious compound word to describe what these stories do for us, a term recently recovered for historical scholars by Joseph Mali.\textsuperscript{16} In any event (and especially after Vatican 2, which finally erased St Crispin’s Day for Catholicism), it is only Shakespeare’s creative reworking of the processes of historical memory and mythistory within that speech which now keeps St Crispin alive at all, along with his somewhat more shadowy day. The Crispin brothers’ story of martyrdom is indeed transformed, “with
advantages”, into a heroic underdog action by the “happy few,” the now metaphorical and quite temporary “band of brothers”—another violent action, rather than saintly suffering. This speech was used, as I am sure you know, to hearten British forces repeatedly over the centuries: during the Jacobite rebellion, the Napoleonic wars, and across media by Lawrence Olivier during the Second World War. It is still being used to rally US troupes in Afghanistan, as a young soldier-actor recently reminded my MIT students without any sense of the situational irony whatsoever: he only heard what Henry’s swelling oratory encouraged him to hear and what he needed it to provide, the speech thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy of transhistorical memory.

Placed back in narrative context, like the quotation from Virgil cited earlier, even Henry’s Agincourt speech can be read as a much more complex testimonial; the vocabulary that ties it uncomfortably with the following scene of Pistol’s mercenary ransom demand also recalls Henry’s general discomfort with any talk of the economics that are in fact underpinning his military campaign. But I will restrain myself from going further down that scholarly path of critique today. Instead, I would reinforce the message that we create and recreate and repurpose meanings as we do media, with Shakespeare providing the master class, the master model, and master plot for doing so in his own historical collaboration across time.

While there may still be providence in the fall of a sparrow, the providential narrative of a distinctive English nation that Guy Fawkes, Agincourt and much else in Shakespeare’s histories once signified is now on the wane. And who should honestly lament that? The mere facts are not why the stories continue to be told, the days celebrated. At the same time, there is much in that English history, and in Shakespeare’s reworking of it, worth studying with care, minding the gaps and the transformations. I do believe we as scholars need to make more visible the work we do culturally when we create what the late lamented Terence Hawkes called “meaning by Shakespeare”: not what the early modern author intended, which even if we knew would now be dead and buried, but a fuller account of the dynamic afterlife he has spawned. Scholars track those meanings and differences in order to understand, not just to criticize. It is this double dynamic that in
fact began to catch on because of the initial decentering of English Shakespeare some 200+ years ago, by, among others, the Romantically-inclined inhabitants of this very town of Weimar.

Which prompts me to repurpose one of my favorite lines from Shakespeare to fit this theme. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, that villain of few words, Don John, nevertheless gets some choice ones when he announces the identity of the woman he is accusing of amorous disloyalty. To Claudio’s understandably baffled question, “Who, Hero?” Don John replies: “Even she: Leonato’s Hero, your Hero, every man’s Hero.” Don John uses parallel structure and the repeated name to mislead his listeners into thinking this sequence of three has a syllogistic, inevitable logic—whereas the qualitative difference between the first two terms and relationships (Leonato’s daughter Hero, your fiancée Hero) should instead cause us to see both the falsity of the third term’s arithmetical logic and yet also its odd psychological resonance for men in that society, worried about women—like men—playing multiple parts during their lifetime. Every man’s Hero? Claudio and Don Pedro aren’t close readers, and they fall for the plot.

But as we use our reading skills and consider Shakespeare’s historical trajectory through Weimar past to Weimar present, we are creating our own sequence that acknowledges both the shifting dynamic of what one name means, and the need to follow the trail closely: be that sequence “Elizabethan Shakespeare, modern Shakespeare, every age’s Shakespeare” or—most fittingly here today—“England’s Shakespeare, Germany’s Shakespeare, every nation’s Shakespeare.” Because Shakespeare himself is now indeed the stuff of multiple histories, the word and its meaning are transformed at every turn. And in the history of its transformation lies the power, the danger and the cause for celebration of that name.

It can be dangerous work to stress Shakespeare’s mutability if one’s audience wants a simpler escapism, a way to commune without recognition of the changes or the precariousness of any form of community, union, or happy ending that his plays create. But this is also why there remains important interpretive work to be done in the
humanities, even as many forces are trying to push them in the direction of big data, social scientific methodologies, and new uses of media, as if any of this would free us from the historical burdens or linguistic complexities that the texts carry. I am myself a participant in MIT’s Global Shakespeares digital humanities initiative, and certainly agree that there is plenty of room for new methods and digital play. But if we do not still do the close work, not as an antiquarian end in itself but as the means to finer perceptions, I think we and our public communities risk being hoodwinked like those noble shadow soldiers Don Pedro and Claudio. “Every man” has a different relationship with Shakespeare, and the differences are worth attending. This is why, pace Stephen Purcell’s assumption that universality and diversity are at odds, I would argue that they are not, or no longer: it is only through such diversity that a 21st-century universality can come to be.

There is one last shadow soldier in this room today, with whose example I conclude. It is my father’s shade. He was an army infantryman in World War II, who enlisted thinking that he would thereby avoid ending up where he did, landing on D-Day and slogging his way from St-Lô to Berlin. He did not like to speak of those experiences at all until late in his life, and always found the romanticizing of war, especially by those in the media who had not fought, appalling and stupid. Yet after the war because of the GI Bill he could go to college, and as a history graduate student he studied the Lancastrian rebellion of the 14th century with the utmost intensity. Later, as a US government staffer in London studying the European Common Market, he would tell his children stories of medieval castles and knights, contributing to my own escapist version of historical memory even as he insisted on precise attention to names and dates. Sadly, he did not, would not, bring us to Germany on our travels.

When I found myself writing about the Armagnacs and Burgundians’ violent background to Henry V’s French invasion in 1415, some of my scholarly friends thought I found the facts an end in themselves, and I know now where that misleading perception came from: the detailed texture of my writing resembled my father’s, which in turn perhaps echoed Shakespeare’s desire to gain some form of mastery over the chaos of historical change.
from a distance. But that was not my goal; rather, studying the facts and factions was a means to get at the dynamics of struggle and erasure that have allowed even Shakespeare’s complex chronicle plays to become proto-nationalist justifications of war. I was trying to counter that legacy in our here-and-now. In using history to address this ongoing problem of forgetting the victims when we retell soldiers’ stories, and in coming to Germany to share this story with you, I too am trying to shed those remnants of the past’s limiting hold on our own precarious unions and international communities by both naming them, and letting go—letting those particular shadows of division recede.

And with their departure, let me unambiguously join in the spirit of celebration as well as critique by putting on my SAA Presidential birthday tiara and joining you in wishing a very happy birthday to William Shakespeare, to Germany’s Shakespeare—and many, many happy returns.

Diana E. Henderson

1 The Shakespeare Association of America; http://www.shakespeareassociation.org
3 Shakespeare in Europe; European Shakespeare Research Association: on ESRA’s history, see https://www.um.es/shakespeare/esra/history.php
other readers, see http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/02/scholarly-perspectives-on-inscription-at-the-911-memorial-museum/ Many thanks to my classicist colleague Stephanie Frampton for calling this debate to my attention.


Moving the scene from the middle of act 2 to the second post-interval position, in effect opening this performance’s condensed 2H4, gave it additional emphasis and power.


A recently popular meaning of “Shadow Soldiers” compounds the irony: it was the name given to a television series about special forces troops around the globe (originating in Britain as Elite World Cops); see http://tv.msn.com/tv/series/shadow-soldiers/ and http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/episodes/shadow-soldiers-brazil1/

Lindsey Hilsum, “In Ukraine, will a propaganda war turn into civil war?”, PBS NewsHour, broadcast 4 April 14. Transcript at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/in-ukraine-will-propaganda-war-turn-civil-war/. I write as the question then posed has been horrifically answered.

See Henderson (2005) passim and (2006), 238-258 especially. The Shakespeare Feiern/Celebrating Shakespeare conference concluded with the installation of Sir Kenneth Branagh as honorary President of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft during a session at the reconstructed Weimar theater, itself a site of rich and haunting historical memory.

Alan Moore and David Lloyd, V for Vendetta (New York: DC Comics, 1988-89). From Book 3: The Land of Do-As-You-Please. In this instance and true to the anarchistic “open source” aesthetic of the series, I cite from the ultimate people’s resource (which in this instance is quite extensive, though not—as perhaps befits this work—not entirely reliable): http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_for_Vendetta; a trade paperback was released in 2008, and is available via Amazon.com among other sites. The companion entry on the film at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_for_Vendetta_(film) similarly provides a wealth of information for those interested in the perspectives of the many collaborators, from writer Moore and illustrator Lloyd onward.

This account requires corroboration from a better source than the interview cited by http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_for_Vendetta

Joseph Mali, Mythistory: The Making of Modern Historiography (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); thanks to Priscilla Wald, whose plenary talk at the 2014 Narrative conference (26-29 March 2014, hosted at MIT) called this to my attention.


For a fuller account of the commodity logic of 2H4 and its effacement in much contemporary performance, see Henderson (2005), 376-96.


Purcell’s comments were part of his talk, cited above.

See especially Henderson (2006), 206-238.
The 5th of November

Thomas Percy
Guido Fawkes
Robert Catesby