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Retroprojection virtual reality: Shakespeare on stage

Abstract:

As virtual reality technologies become more widely available, an expanded definition of both virtual and reality becomes necessary: authors (and playwrights in particular) have strived for centuries to depict reality, and plays performed on the early modern stages have the distinction of demonstrating the world's current and historical events in a virtually 'real time' of drama. One such epoch-making moment is the assassination of Julius Caesar, staged by the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1599 as witnessed by two Swiss travellers Felix and Thomas Platter. This article presents a dialogue between two other members in the audience: Nathan, a descendant of the Platters who comes from a distant point in the future, and John, a young law student from London on the cusp of becoming the seventeenth century playwright Webster whose early play (now lost) *Caesar's Fall* may have been directly inspired by his visit to the Globe and meeting with Nathan. This fictional account of a play staged at the original Globe is based upon present-day scholars' detailed reconstruction of the famous playhouse and casts many of the company's players, including Shakespeare himself, in roles for *Julius Caesar*. This dialogue presents a nexus between Digital Humanities and Shakespeare Studies through a creative writing experiment with a science fiction spin.

Biographical note:

Professor Kyle Stooshnov is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. He has presented versions of this work at conferences in Barcelona, Spain and Montpellier, France. Parts of this project have already been presented at the Digital Salon of recent Shakespeare Association of America's Annual General Meeting in Vancouver, Canada and New Orleans, United States. Forthcoming publications derived from his research are the chapters 'A Quantumeracy Reading List' for *Provoking Curriculum Studies: A Manifesto of Inspiration/ Imagination/ Interconnection* and "'Admit me Chorus to this history": Staging *Contact!Unload* and Digital Literacy' for *Soldiers Performing Self in Contact!Unload: Innovations in Theatre and Counseling*.

Keywords:

Creative writing – William Shakespeare – Virtual reality – Webster – Stoppard

Prologue

Mes amis, across the Channel I come,
A refugee from Rodez shock therapy
To stand upon England's world-famous stage;
Let Antonin Artaud¹ be your chorus
And revel in the age of alchemy
When Shakespeare wrote his cruel great tragedies.
Yet neither *Lear* nor *Othello* do I praise
So well as the shedding of Roman blood
And birthing of the grim British Empire;
When the stories of Caesar and Brutus,
Lovestruck Antony and Cleopatra
And many souls who died in civil wars
Have tragically played out each "lofty scene"
On a stage, conceived by me, still unborn
That I named virtual reality.²
Look ahead to the future! We shall see
A man who can travel backwards in time
Projecting himself into London's past
Through the working of his mirage-machine;
To meet with a mind as haunted than mine
And share this virtual technology
Giving ghostly voice to Webster's Duchess.
All of this done in some strange quantum state,
Where the observers can enter the scene
Affecting each other's reality,
The virtual audience will soon see.

Actus Primus. Scaena Prima

Enter NATHAN & JOHN, with players above.

NATHAN Let's just say it is a complicated theory.

JOHN It would be less complicated if you could simply explain what your virtual reality is, and why we are watching a play at the Globe.

POPE "But what trade art thou? Answer me directly."

COWLEY "A trade, sir, that I hope I may use with a safe conscience..."³

NATHAN It has already begun! I hope we did not miss too much.

JOHN Nay, the prologue was spoke just as we crossed the gate and the man you seek will be on stage soon.

COWLEY "Why, sir, cobble you."

GOUGH "Thou art a cobbler, art thou?"

JOHN We were better if stayed at Middle Temple a while longer; this mild comedy only suits the addled-minded auditors.

NATHAN I am sorry to have interrupted your studies, Master Webster, but today's the only time I am able to see this play.

JOHN See it, you say? Nay, if there were anything on stage now worth the watching, I'd tell you. The company struggles to find their next Tarlington⁴ and leaves these bunglers to pull faces at each other.

NATHAN As I've mentioned, it has been a long journey to get here, and I would sorely miss another word.

JOHN Too much of time is wasted on these players. All but Tom mouth their cues, and his apprentice can barely keep pace⁵ while Rich is getting a bit too old for these mechanical parts, yet he is the closest man they have to Kemp.⁶

NATHAN Your skill in naming players makes up for the time you say is wasted. Would that you can point out Will Shakespeare when he appears.

Exeunt players from stage

Manet Pope & Gough

- GOUGH “See where their basest mettle be not moved:
They vanish tongue-tied in their guiltiness...”
- JOHN Shall not be too long now with the plebs gone
from the stage, perhaps then you can tell me
more about how this play is virtual reality.
- NATHAN You’ve seen this play already, haven’t you?
- JOHN I was there when this theatre first opened back in
June.⁷
- NATHAN Lucky for you! Then you will recall the moment
when Calphurnia insists that Caesar stays at
home, yet he ends up going to the Senate? Or
how Cassius thinks the battle is lost and dies by
his own sword?
- JOHN I do, and so do the eavesdroppers around us now
know what to expect.
- NATHAN Never mind them, they are simulacra of
simulation.⁸
- JOHN And this is important for a virtual something?
- NATHAN This theatre is exactly the place for virtual
representation. What is the motto of this theatre?
- JOHN *Totus mundus agit histrionem*: the whole world
performs as if in a playhouse.
- NATHAN “The world’s a stage” as some would have it. We
get to witness such unique turning points: Caesar
did go to Senate despite numerous warnings,
Cassius *lost* even though his army won the day.
Events like these could only happen on such a
world-stage that is a hyperreality of historical
events.
- JOHN Yond Swissers have unusual expressions! When
I met your cousin, he did not speak like a
Frenchman.
- NATHAN Think of him more like a distant relative, the
Platters are from the German side of the
country.⁹
- JOHN And you, Monsieur Plettner, speak English with
a accent I have never heard. From where came
you?

NATHAN Let's just say I come from a world far, far away...

Sennet, enter a large group on stage, including BURBAGE, HEMINGES, PHILLIPS and SHAKESPEARE & divers others

JOHN There's your man, with the black hat.

NATHAN Does he play Caesar?

JOHN That's Augustine with the laurels, Will plays the part of Cicero.¹⁰

PHILLIPS "Calphurnia."

COWLEY "Peace, ho! Caesar speaks."

PHILLIPS "Calphurnia..."

NATHAN Who is that playing Casca?

JOHN You surprise me with your familiarity for each role, but do you not recognize him as the cobbler from the last scene?

NATHAN So many actors on the stage, it is hard to tell who plays what.

JOHN None here seem bothered by it. Didn't you want to see all of them upon the stage? Moreover they play one of my favourite lessons from Roman history.

NATHAN What's that, beware the Ides of March?

JOHN The Lupercalia: it happened on my birthday, and each year at the Merchant Taylors¹¹ my mates would offer me a crown of laurels. Then I had to recite the passage from Plutarch.

NATHAN See how history replays in our minds, our accepted reality? And up until now, no other way to observe it happening than by reading about it in a bunch of books.

JOHN What books?

NATHAN All of it: Plutarch, North's translation, this play with all its anachronisms.

JOHN Ana-chron-isms? Look here, I know that Plutarch lived long after Caesar died: he writes on whole line of successive emperors.¹² And this *play* is just another tragical history like many of the English princes or Patriarchs already seen on such stages as this one. What is virtual about it?

NATHAN What becomes of the players, how do they create history on stage? This is what *is* virtual. But that is not even what interests me; I am here to explore how it becomes reality.¹³ What if I could show you what actually happened, you could watch Caesar's fall with your own eyes?

PHILLIPS "He is a dreamer. Let us leave him. Pass."

Sennet, exuent players into tiring house

Manet Burbage and Heminges

NATHAN Where I come from, it is possible to project yourself into the past and witness history as it happens.

JOHN Then you are very much the Mephistophilis and I should be wary of what devils like you say.

NATHAN "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."¹⁴

JOHN Any "sound magician is a demi-god."¹⁵

NATHAN In this future, it will be possible to visit anywhere and everywhere within recorded history. I am here, now, because one of my ancestors wrote about watching *Julius Caesar* at the Globe in 1599.

JOHN If you have such powers as you claim, what makes you think I'd be happy visiting the past¹⁶ and seeing the same pageant that I paid for both of us to see here?

NATHAN Where would you go, if you could see any part of literate history?

JOHN I'd want to see the age whence you came, that has such capabilities to send you off to distant ages.

NATHAN Well. that might prove a bit more challenging, as not many have written about the Retroprojection VR, nor about the middle of my century. The reeveere¹⁷ will need to be calibrated for two, and I will try to get you as far into the twenty-first century as possible.

JOHN What provisions do I need for this journey?

NATHAN Do wear spectacles?

JOHN I never have.

NATHAN Then you have all you need.

JOHN How long will we be gone?

NATHAN Technically, you will still be here, just like I have been standing in the same spot in my century since I arrived in yours. Part of you will go with me, but it will be like you never left, physically speaking.

JOHN You have been speaking too much, and very little of it have I understood. But if you suggest no harm will come to me and all I need is what I have got on my person for this journey, then I am set. Just one question.

NATHAN Just a moment. Alright, we're ready. Your question?

JOHN Will taking this journey make me understand what you mean by virtual reality?

NATHAN Have you heard the expression "seeing is believing?"

JOHN No.

NATHAN I might have then said forget what you know, but since you are starting off with a relatively blank page, just take note of what you can. Give me your hand please.

HEMINGES "Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?"

BURBAGE "No, Cassius; for the eye sees not itself
But by reflection, by some other thing..."

Exuent omnes

Act One SCENE TWO

A spacious garden in Derbyshire on an April morning, John is dressed modestly in a shirt and waistcoat with tan-coloured breeches, making Nathan's surcote cape and Venetian-styled leggings a bit more conspicuous in their new surrounding. Before them stands a large country house with large French windows. Inside the mostly empty room stand two women and a table covered with books and papers.

Harriet H "...My genius brother will be much relieved. He's in love with you, I suppose you know."

Felicity "(angry) That's a joke!"

John What place is this?

Nathan We typically end up in a story that has a range of time when we jump from one text to another, to allow us to adjust to the shift. Judging by the architecture, it's a family home in the northern part of ...

Timothy, an awkward silent boy, passes between John and Nathan as they look into the house. He enters and approaches the two women inside.

Harriet H "Hello, Gus, what have you got?"¹⁸

Nathan and John peer inside and observe Timothy handing an apple to Felicity, who awkwardly accepts.

Nathan Strange. I have never seen this place or these people before. Usually we cross over to an empty mansion in Scotland, where Virginia Woolf set *To the Lighthouse*. Let me look this up.

Nathan produces a small flat box that fits into the palm of his hand. Tapping the top of the box causes it to project multiple screens in front of him.

John Whomever we saw, they are gone.

Both stare inside the room to see that the scene has shifted, slightly, with two men and a girl now occupying the same space: Emma sits at the table peering into her notebook, Rufus carries an ornate quarto with letters stuffed inside while Allan, dressed in a servant's livery, attends to Rufus' letter-reading.

Rufus "Why have you stopped?"

Emma (*studying a sheet of paper with difficulty*) "*Solio insessa ... in igne ... seated on a throne ... in the fire ... and also on a ship ... sedebat regina ... sat the queen ...*"

Rufus "There is no reply, Jellaby. Thank you. (*He folds the letter up and places it between the leaves of 'The Couch of Eros'.*)"

Nathan (*reading from screen*) Jellaby... graphic novel by Kean Soo¹⁹ ... inspired by the play *Arcadia*, that sounds more like it!

John Sir Philip Sydney's books?

Nathan No, it's by someone named Tom Stoppard. Just gimme a sec (*continues interacting with screen*).

Emma "... the wind smelling sweetly ... *purpureis velis* ..."

John She is translating Plutarch's *Antony*.

Nathan She should be Thomasina Coverly, age thirteen, first performed by Emma Fielding at the Royal National Theatre.

Allan nods stiffly at Rufus and leaves through the adjoining music room.

John (impressed) Isn't she clever!

Emma "... was like as to – something – by, with or from lovers – oh, Septimus!"

Nathan A ha! There we have it: Septimus Hodge her tutor, age twenty-two, played by ...

John Shall we inside and meet these players?

Nathan Perhaps better if we observe from the next room, just so we can let the scene plays out? At least until I learn a bit more about the text we've entered.

The two of them enter the music room from the outside. There is more furniture in this room as compared to the schoolroom the next room over. Most noticeable is the Broadwood pianoforte in the centre of the room and bookshelves lining the walls. Nathan sits in one of the armchairs nearest the door to schoolroom while John wanders around to see the music room's collection. Muffled voices of Emma and Rufus are heard through the door.

John Whose home is this?

Nathan Lord Croom, most likely a fictional character, yet his daughter seems to be based upon Ada Lovelace²⁰, a pioneer in mathematics who conceptualized a model for the first binary computer

John I'd be more fascinated by this discovery of yours if I understood one iota of what you've just said. At least the tutor and his pupil are talking sensibly.

Nathan Look, my apologies for keeping you in the dark, sorry. You can go into the next room, but it won't matter - all of this is merely a simulation based upon a play someone wrote over sixty years ago.

John A play, called *Arcadia*, written over sixty years ago, and I never heard of it?

Nathan Actually it about four centuries into the future from your timeline, but yes, a fictional account of life in an English country home. And all of this, and them, is part of a vast computer simulation. It is like a giant machine in which we can recreate a dream based on stories and plays other people wrote.

John You mention dreams, but this is unlike any I have ever had. (*rushes towards the piano*) I never played the clavichord before, but if this were a dream I could sound out a melody.

He presses his hands down upon the keys, making a jarring noise. Nathan eyes the schoolroom door, alarmed, and slowly approaches John.

Nathan Mute instrument (*the noise suddenly stops*). I said it is like a dream, but you cannot control this simulation. Only I have access to the user interface.

John Why did you bring me into this fiendish, unnatural simulation?²¹ To hell with your oxymoronic virtual reality!

Nathan You are caught up in the details, Master Webster. It is just a machine, just like this instrument was designed to make music, these books were made to tell stories, or this ... (*noticing a desktop computer in the far corner*) this machine connects users to a worldwide web of information. All of these are simply details, but what I want to show you is how we immerse ourselves in narrative.

Emma (*loud exclamation carries into the music room*) "I hate Cleopatra!"

Nathan Seems like the dialogue next door has picked up the feedback of our little misunderstanding.

John The girl and her tutor. At least they speak an everyday language. Aren't they who you brought me here to watch?

Nathan Of course, go watch them, if you'd like. But I would advise you to keep your distance and stay out of their sightlines. We are in a simulation ... sorry, we are witnesses to a show in progress and unlike these books where the story is already set in print, minor disturbances seem to throw off the actors.

John moves to the connecting door and peers through to hear the dialogue about the Library of Alexandria. Meanwhile, Nathan sits at the computer terminal starts up the antiquated machine, mostly by trial and error. A few moments later the dot-matrix printer noisily bursts into activity. Nathan is bemused while John is frightened.

Nathan Whoops.

John (*harsh but hushed voice*) "Adders and serpents!"²² What noise do you make!

Nathan Mute printer? (*the screeching sound of the printer stops*) Sorry, just wanted to give you a souvenir from the 21st century.

John Well, keep it to yourself. There is an excellent discourse here about the Library of Alexandria, and it is the first time since leaving *Caesar* that anything made sense.

After a few moments of glancing at the print out, Nathan joins John by the door.

Nathan She is something, isn't she?

John I confess I doubted that someone so young could be so wise, and the role is performed by a girl, something I would have never thought I'd live to see.

Nathan Yes, I see: the boy-players of your early modern stage. Much has changed since your time.

John I miss, but cannot tell what is missing, something in their speech. It runs too fast, there is too much meaning but not enough sense. (*pause*) I have it, they speak not in proper verse.

Nathan Right, I never would have noticed that!

Rufus (*his mock-officious tone carries into the music room*) "Now, where were we? Let me see if I can attempt a free translation for you..."

John Sounds like we are going to get the schoolmaster's translation of Mark Antony's life. You arranged for this to take place, didn't you?

Nathan Far be it for me to interfere with the story.

John Stop talking, then, and let me hear!

Rufus "... 'the - something - the poop was beaten gold, purple the sails, and what's this? - oh yes, - so perfumed that -'"

Emma "(*catching on and furious*) Cheat!"

Rufus “(*imperturbably*) – ‘the winds were lovesick with them...’”

John She will not let him finish his recitation!

Emma “(jumping to her feet) Cheat! Cheat! Cheat!”

John What a bold, brave performance!

Nathan Quick, what lines does he speak? What is the play?

Rufus (*finishing off his effortless “translation”*) “... For her own person, it begged all description – she did lie in her pavilion –”

Both Nathan and John are stunned to see the young woman “in tears of rage” hastily storming out the door towards the garden. Rufus has a contrite expression on his face as he watches as she “nearly bumps into [Graham] who is entering.” Before she runs out into the garden, she yells at Rufus.

Emma “I hope you die!”

Graham “Good God, man, what have you told her?”

Nathan and John retire from the schoolroom door as the men continue their dialogue. John is bewildered and impressed by Emma range of emotions. Nathan looks more perplexed. Across the room, the now-silenced printer has just finished unspooling its last sheet of paper.

Nathan Did you recognize the speech he quoted?

John As I mentioned before, part of it were a schoolboy’s translation of Plutarch, but the lines this man Septimus spoke were in verse.

Nathan Like much of the play *Julius Caesar*.

Excitedly, Nathan rushes to the long ream of printed paper, and tears off the first printed page. John cautiously joins him beside the computer.

Nathan If you are able to correctly identify this verse, I may be able to recover a lost piece of literature and access it through the reeveeree!

John Doesn’t your virtual reality have access to all stories ever written?

Nathan It does. Rather, it did. Around the time I was finishing my master degree, a cataclysmic event²⁴ shut down the Internet. Once the power came back on, the entire digital collection of literature was gone. We still had books (*gestures around the bookshelves in the music room*) but no way to systematically restore them on the Internet.

John Why would you need to do that?

Nathan Nearly all of the information in the future was digitized, and it all suddenly disappeared. Fortunately the qubits running the quantum computers were soon restored,²⁵ and society could use the RVR viewers to recover lost data. Most of my research is an attempt to reclaim lost texts.

John By texts, you mean plays don’t you?

Nathan tears off a page from the print-out and gives it to John.

Nathan My theory is that any known text can be recovered even from a few lines of the original text. Digital texts are somehow encoded in the dark matter the Earth once passed through, and the RVR helps to reclaim each textual remain.

John So why do you need me to listen to Septimus' speech?

Nathan . You have a far better ear for the poetry than I have, please write down any line of verse you hear. I'll look over what you write (*holding the printed out pages just out of John's grasp*) so that the RVR viewer might have something to connect with and discover another lost text.

John This is outrageously difficult to understand.

Nathan Think of it as finding a scrap of papyrus that once belonged to the Library of Alexandria.

John To see another lost text that these actors may or may not be speaking?

John returns to the schoolroom door to peer into the next room. A couple other actors have joined Rufus and Graham in heated discussion, including the lady of the house played by Harriet Walter.

Harriet W. "...One does not aim at poetry with pistols. At poets, perhaps..."

John I doubt they will be speaking in verse, despite their talk about poetry.

Nathan Would it make things easier to go back and hear the earlier speech again?

John I suppose we could interrupt this scene and ask them to start over.

Nathan Or there is a better solution... (*taps the small box*) Restart the play from the top of the current scene.

Both rooms darken for a moment and when the light come up, Rufus, Allan and Emma are in their original positions for the Latin translation lesson.

Rufus "Why have you stopped?"

Emma (*studying a sheet of paper with difficulty*) "Solio insessa ... in igne ..."

Pen in hand, John attends to the actors' speech while Nathan reads over the printed page.

Act II Scene ii²⁶

Flourish as players exeunt. Heminges, CONDELL & LOWIN manet; John and Nathan above.

LOWIN "Welcome from Egypt, sir."

HEMINGES "Half the heart of Caesar, worthy Maecenas.
My honourable friend, Agrippa."

CONDELL "Good Enobarbus."

NATHAN What place is this?

- JOHN The Blackfriars' Hall, by the looks of it. But those are the Chamberlain's Men on the scaffold.²⁷ To what part of history have we returned?
- NATHAN I was hoping that you could tell me!
- JOHN This has become that part of the bible where the blind man leads the blind.
- NATHAN It will just take a few moments to orientate ourselves.
- JOHN So long as neither of us falls into the pit!
- LOWIN "She's a most triumphant lady, if report be square of her."
- HEMINGES "When she first met Mark Antony, she pursed up his heart..."
- JOHN And these devils below have got the fires lit.
- NATHAN The candles, you mean? I read somewhere that innovations like indoor theatres gave play their five-act structure, allowing breaks for stagehands to replace extinguished candles.²⁸
- JOHN One of these poor daemons is me.
- NATHAN All the smoke and illusion of the stage... Wait, where?
- JOHN Yonder is my other self, on the far side of the third bench.
- NATHAN Well, there's a happy coincidence. Looks like you turned out well.
- JOHN He motions me to join him.
- NATHAN Can both of you wait until the next act break? I am hoping you could guide me through this performance.
- JOHN They speak the same speech as your friend Septimus recited at country house you called Arcadia.
- HEMINGES " ... did sit alone,
Whistling to th'air; which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in nature."
- CONDELL "Rare Egyptian!"

NATHAN It is too difficult to understand what they say, I have not the same ear as you for this dialogue - plus I can barely guess what action takes place on such a bare stage.

JOHN I shall return here within a few moments. Be patient and listen; the staging may not be a mansion crammed with books or your computers, but makes use of the same rhetoric every schoolboys knows.²⁹

NATHAN My education was more mixed-media³⁰ than listening to speeches.

JOHN Is not your purpose here to learn the player's speech in a virtual reality simulation? I must go.

Exit John

NATHAN At least tell me how... never mind.

Exeunt Heminges, Condell & Lowin

Enter Burbage and TOOLEY, with RICE dressed as girl between them

BURBAGE "The world and my great office will sometimes Divide me from your bosom."

RICE "All which time, Before the gods my knee shall bow..."

Enter John, above

JOHN So much has changed in my London! Monsieur Plettner, what have you done to me?

NATHAN Your transcribing, in fact, is what brought us back.

BURBAGE "... Good night, dear lady.
Good night, sir."

TOOLEY "Good night."

Exeunt Tooley and Rice.

Enter Shakespeare

JOHN Your virtual goose-chase into the future started it all.

SHAKESPEARE "Would I had never come from thence, nor you thither."

NATHAN Don't get angry, you have helped to preserve one of Shakespeare's plays for generations to come.

JOHN A pox on Shakespeare, what about my plays! For the past nine years my other self down there has toiled away on adapted plays and collaborations. What makes this fellow so special in your future?

SHAKESPEARE “O Antony, stay not by his side.
Thy daemon – that thy spirit which keeps thee –”

JOHN Almost an entire decade working on Dekker and Middleton’s plays³¹, and never getting to stage a work that is wholly my own, unlike that soothsaying satan down there.

SHAKESPEARE “...I say again, thy spirit
Is all afraid...”

NATHAN And you learned all this from your double, just now?

JOHN It was as if a voice, mine own, spoke in my head as the two of us met.

NATHAN Sounds like you had a brush with the bicameral mind.³²

Exit Shakespeare

JOHN You may laugh it off, but I gave up my career as a lawyer by dropping out of Middle Temple to follow you around in this RVR room that still makes no sense.

NATHAN Don’t fret, John. You’ll get your day in the sun, or rather candle-light. You never examined the sheet of paper I gave you while we watched *Arcadia*, did you? (*returns the page*) This is what started our RVR romp.

JOHN (*reads*) “The tragedy of the Dutchess of Malfy. As it was Presented priuatly, at the Black Friars... VVritten by John Webster... in Paules Church-yard, 1623.”³³

NATHAN Many of the same actors we see here were cast in your play.

JOHN That I have not written yet!

NATHAN No worries, it will come. I’m sure your other self down there is dreaming up what to write as we speak.

*Exit Burbage, followed by UNDERWOOD*³⁴

Enter COOKE, SHARPE, Rice & Cowley on stage

COOKE “Give me some music - music, moody food
Of us that trade in love.”

ALL “The music, ho!”

JOHN Will this play of mine be as much of a spectacle
as what we have here?

NATHAN I don’t know, I only got to see it in rehearsal.

Enter ARMIN dressed as an eunuch.

COOKE “Let it alone! Let’s to billiards...”

JOHN So we meet again in the future.

NATHAN Yes. Sort of. Keep in mind all of these
simulations are a long time ago for me. Now,
let’s hear out more about show we are watching.

ARMIN “As well as I can, madam.”

COOKE “And when good will is showed, though’t come
too short

The actor may plead pardon...”

Act IV Scene ii

Webster with actors

SHARPE “Dost thou think we shall know one another
in th’ other world?”

PALLANT “Yes, out of question.”

SHARPE “Oh, that it were possible we might
But hold some two days’ conference with the
dead
To behold my tragedy.”

Noises within

JOHN You have jumped ahead in the text, Dickon, and
cued the madmen too soon.

SHARPE Sorry, John. Can we take it from your last line?

PALLANT “Yes, out of question.”

Enter Nathan, above stage

SHARPE “... some two days’ conference with the dead.
From them I should learn somewhat ...”

JOHN Thank you, sirs, do continue. I must attend to an old acquaintance in the gallery.

John joins Nathan above stage

NATHAN An old acquaintance?

JOHN You look well, considering how long it has been since we last met.

NATHAN You are the playwright, John Webster?

JOHN Don't act so surprised, Monsieur Plettner, it has been years since I received that letter from your uncle and I took you to see *Julius Caesar* at the Globe.

NATHAN Is it possible? Tell me more about this letter from my uncle.

JOHN I'll fetch it for you later, the players are currently in rehearsal for a private performance of my latest play.

NATHAN (*read handbill*) "*Presented priuatly, at the Black Friars...*"

SHARPE "And Fortune seems only to have her eyesight To behold my tragedy."

Noises of madmen below

JOHN You will want to watch this, I wrote a scene as tribute to our mad virtual reality adventure.

Enter POLLARD below, as servant

POLLARD "I am come to tell you Your brother hath intended you some sport..."

NATHAN What do you know of the Retroprojection Virtual Reality?

JOHN Not much more than you explained to me at Sidley Park.³⁵

NATHAN There is much that I have to learn about our last encounter.

JOHN I'll fetch the Herr Platter's letter soon, I keep it in my copy of Montaigne³⁶ downstairs. But you are going to want to see this masque of madness I wrote.

SHARPE "Let them come in."

POLLARD "There's a mad lawyer and ..."

- JOHN I wrote myself into the play!
- POLLARD "...forfeited his wits
"By jealousy; an astrologian..."
- JOHN That's you.
- POLLARD "That in his works said such a day o'th'month
Should be the day of doom, and failing o't
Ran mad..."
- NATHAN Thanks; I hope this is meant as a compliment.
- JOHN I recalled your description of some cosmological
event that destroyed all the digital copies of
books. Sounds like doomsday to me.
- NATHAN And what day o'th'month does this event
happen?
- JOHN I forget, but with all the talk nowadays of
telescopes and gravity³⁷ I would not be surprised
to see another one of those computer machines.
- NATHAN Sounds like it was quite the adventure we had!
- JOHN As disorientating as it was back then, what I
wouldn't give to relive those moments again.
- NATHAN Or to live through them for the first time.
- SHARPE "(to Pallant) Sit, Cariola. (to Pollard) Let them
loose when you please
For I am chained to endure all your tyranny."

Here enters Tooley, Underwood, Rice and others, one of whom sings to "a dismal kind of music"

RICE "Oh, let us howl some heavy note..."

Etc. etc.

Academic epilogue

Much of my research in early modern drama involves entering into an immersive environment to observe historical events as they are fictionalized by the playwright. Shakespeare writes knowingly of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra based upon his reading of English translations of the Roman historian Plutarch, adapting for stage someone else's narrative based upon troublesome, inaccurate accounts. *The Life of Julius Caesar* seems a straightforward biography, and yet Shakespeare's play problematizes the relationships between historical figures, as Khan (2013) describes:

it is an enigmatic play, representing the assassination of Caesar from shifting perspectives that frustrate any certain judgement of either the victim or his assassins. Cicero's statement, 'But men may construe things after their fashion,/Clean from the

purpose of the things for themselves' (1.3.34-5) better suggests how we experience the play, for though it poses many questions it provides no clear answers, leaving us to 'construe things' for ourselves (226).

Antony and Cleopatra likewise stages many of the ambiguities about the title characters based on history, most noticeably the portrayal of Cleopatra in Enobarbus' speech (partially recited by Septimus during Thomasina's Latin translation in *Arcadia*) does not, as Harris (1994) and Crane (2009) point out, describe the beautiful Egyptian queen herself but instead makes note of her opulent surroundings. Audiences are left to interpret her powerful allure just as much as Caesar's ambition or Brutus' nobility, and efforts to construe things as the playwright may have wanted to present are challenged by lines such as 'Some squeaking Cleopatra boy [her] greatness/I' th' posture of a whore' (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.221-2) uttered by the unknown player in the King's Men, far removed from the Egyptian original. While a true account of what lines were spoken on stage by which actor are details lost to the ages, it is possible to construct a simulation of events such as a staged performance that embraces such uncertainties and ambiguities, even to see the playwright perform in his own plays. Virtual reality as originally coined by the dramatist Antonin Artaud (1938) will become Webster's (2009: 211) fantastic Galileo's glass allowing us to 'view another spacious world'.

Endnotes

1. French poet and dramatist Artaud spent the latter years of his life committed to an asylum in Rodez where he received electroshock treatment as a cure for his delusions. Prior to his internment, he wrote *The Theatre and Its Double* (Artaud 1938) outlining the post-surrealist Theatre of Cruelty to awaken the audience's subconscious through reworked classic texts.
2. Artaud (1938: 73).
3. Lines from Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar* are based upon the Internet edition by Crystal & Crystal (2008), whose on-line glossary makes use of the New Penguin Shakespeare text originally edited by Norman Sanders in 1967. Players in Lord Chamberlain's Men who would have likely been with the company at the opening of the Globe Theatre, here referred to by their last names, according to Astington (2010: 188-224) Appendix: Principle actors 1558-1660.
4. Shapiro (2005) speculates about the departure of Will Kemp from the Lord Chamberlain's Men prior to the construction of the Globe Theatre. Wiles (1987) suggests that Robert Armin was part of the company in 1599, but was mostly performing at the Curtain until what I consider to be his breakout role as Touchstone in *As You Like It*. Comedic parts, therefore, were shared among the players for *Julius Caesar* much to John Webster's distaste.
5. Tribble (2011) theorizes upon the role that established actors had with their apprentices, often performing in short scenes together so apprentices could rehearse privately. Astington (2010: 99) identifies Robert Gough as having 'trained under the player Thomas Pope.'
6. Gurr (2009) notes that Richard Cowley played the part of Verges to Kemp's Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*.
7. Falk (2014) dates the opening of the Globe Theatre to June 12th, 1599, according to astrological advice about the summer solstice and a new moon. Sohmer (1999) complicates our ability to date its opening by investigating England's change from Julian to Gregorian calendar (also mentioned in Shapiro, 2005).

8. Baudrillard (2004) develops his theme of hyperreality, in this case the audience at the Globe in 1599 are a fictional construct for the ‘actual’ participants Nathan and John attending the play.
9. The diary of Thomas Platter the Younger is a well-known source for dating the play *Julius Caesar* on September 21, 1599. According to Flood (2003) he wrote in German and also studied medicine in Montpellier like his half-brother before the two traveled to England together.
10. Admittedly, not much is known about the parts each member of the company would have played. Shapiro (2005: 371) points to ‘the scanty evidence’ of Shakespeare’s roles and suggests with the new theatre in addition to the plays like *Hamlet* and *As You Like It* still to write, he would not be able to take on major roles. Bryson (2007: 81) concurs that Shakespeare would have ‘specialized in good but fairly undemanding roles in his own plays.’ The role of Cicero, according to Mahood (1998: 118), has few lines yet ‘they have a gnomic force, befitting the historical Cicero, which reverberates through the remainder of the play.’
11. One of the few biographical details known about the playwright John Webster was that his father (also named John) belonged to the Merchant Taylors’ Guild and ‘it seems likely that [his son] would have attended the Merchant Taylors’ School, among the most esteemed schools in sixteenth-century London’ (Coleman, 2010: 5). His birthdate, however, is speculation as most biographers can only pin down the year 1578 as an estimate.
12. Mahood (1998: 115) notes ‘a mere three or four generations’ since the assassination of Julius Caesar and the battle of Philippi (44-42 BCE) until the Flavian dynasty (69-96 CE) when Plutarch writes about the lives of Caesar, Brutus and Antony.
13. Westerhoff (2011: 24) discusses historical simulation as ‘within our technological reach.’
14. Science fiction author Arthur C. Clark (1999: 113) peers into the future, but also reconnects to the magical innovations of poetry and the written word, citing Shakespeare’s Sonnet 55 and explaining how ‘Plato and Caesar speak to us across the ages more clearly than most of our fellow men. And with the invention of the printing press, the written word became virtually immortal.’
15. Marlowe (1971) *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* 1.1.
16. Falk (2014: 141) argues against an autobiographical reading of Shakespeare’s plays, suggesting to avoid ideas like the playwright ‘time-traveled to ancient Rome to witness the big moment [Caesar’s assassination]’ as he ‘could just read Plutarch’s account’ as John would have.
17. A commonplace name for Retroprojection Virtual Reality or RVR, reduced to its initial sounds, according to ARPANET researcher Roy Amara’s Law (Phillips, 2013: para. 4) ‘We tend to overestimate the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run.’ The evolution of virtual reality by the mid-21st century will be led through the gaming community, commonly coining such a colloquialism as reeveeree.
18. Dialogue for this scene is from Tom Stoppard’s (1993) play *Arcadia* and the characters are named after actors in the initial performance at Lyttelton Theatre, London on April 13, 1993.
19. Soo (2014).
20. Leithauser (2013: para. 6) makes this suggestion in his *New Yorker* article, contrasting ‘Lovelace’s tale is one of eventual fruition and recognition, [while] the teenage Thomasina is fated for a permanent eclipse.’ See also Essigner (2014) account of Ada’s invention.
21. John may be considering the ethical, philosophical or even theological implication of simulation. He may not have read his contemporary Sir Francis Bacon’s (1973) essay ‘Of Simulation and Dissimulation’ but would have been aware of the consequences of ‘false profession.’ It is more likely, given his eventual career in drama, that he would have considered Sir Philip Sidney’s (1970) essay ‘An Apology for Poetry’ which defends imaginative literature against attacks by such satirists as Stephen Gosson’s (1579) *Schoole of Abuse*.

22. Part of the final speech from Marlowe's (1971) *Dr. Faustus*; John still must think of Nathan as a Mephistophilis.
23. A Carrington-like solar storm is an extreme example of a disruption to the earth's electromagnetic field that could affect data and infrastructure supporting the Internet, as reported by Gorvett (2015).
24. The superposition state of entangled photons would enable computer functions to resume after the electromagnetic pulse disruption. Gribbin (2013: 255) describes the possibility of a future quantum Internet via 'modular quantum ion processor... linked by photons.'
25. Unlike the First Folio version of *Julius Caesar* featuring act divisions, there is only 'Actus Primus. Scaena Prima.' for the First Folio's *Anthonie, and Cleopatra* and only exits and entrances to separate individual scene. The following quoted dialogue again makes use of Crystal & Crystal's (2008) Internet editions, based upon Jones' (1977) New Penguin edition.
26. Webster would have been familiar with this venue as a former monastery. He may have even seen performances by various children's companies up to his RVR departure in 1599. Gurr (2009) writes about the early and later boys companies who had access to Blackfriars. Shapiro (2015) follows up on the demise of children's companies by 1608 due to plague and scandalous material being performed. James Burbage owned the Blackfriars from 1596 but it wasn't until 1608 that his son's company, the King's Men, took possession of the indoor stage.
27. Crystal (2016).
28. A large part of a child's education, such as Webster's at the Merchant Taylor's, involved learning the art of speaking, as mentioned in Bate & Thornton (2012: 124-126).
29. Gee (2013: 58) imagines 21st century technology 'that would allow individuals who are engaged in discussion or debate to offer not just arguments, but experience to each other' with recorded and simulated stories that are 'a greater possibility now with digital media and virtual reality.' It is likely such educational technology will be available to Nathan during his school years.
30. Most biographical details about John Webster indicate a variety of collaborations with playwrights, most of them not available in print (Webster, 2004). During the first few years of King James (1603-1625) there was a 'strong demand city comedies' (van Es, 2016: 96) such as Webster and Dekker's *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho*.
31. There is a fascinating notion about auditory hallucinations in pre-conscious civilizations elaborated in Jaynes' (2000: 55) study. 'Subjective conscious mind,' Jaynes points out, 'is an analog of what is called the real world' hinting at other virtual worlds outside of conscious perception. A representation of this voice-in-the-head can be found in Act V scene iii with Echo at the grave of *The Duchess of Malfi*.
32. Title page of the quarto edition of Webster's play, first performed around 1612.
33. Another player in the King's Men, John Underwood briefly appears here in *Antony & Cleopatra*'s Act 2 scene 3 as Ventidius. The actor, along with Burbage, Condell, Lowin, Rice and others, are listed as characters in Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi* (see Webster 2009: 118).
34. The name of the fictional country house in Stoppard's (1993) play *Arcadia*.
35. Shapiro (2005: 332) mentions how an English translation of Montaigne's *Essays* had begun in 1598 and was published in 1603 and that dramatists like Shakespeare, John Marston and Webster 'soon turned their attention to the essay as well.' Like Septimus in Stoppard's play, Webster probably adopted the habit of keeping his letters in books he was reading.
36. Falk (2014: 243) covers much of the early modern scientific discovery as it relates to Shakespeare's plays, speculating on the impact of Galileo and Kepler in the early 1610's. No mention of Webster's play are made in Falk's book, but he speaks generally of Webster's contemporaries: 'the playwright wields his own peculiar brand of magic: Attending a theatrical performance is, after all, accepting an invitation to be (benignly) deceived.'

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Research Statement

Research background

Shakespeare's plays are one of the most adapted literary texts in English or arguably in any language, and the process of adaptation includes a wide variety of media from stage and page to airwaves and screens of all sizes. Murray (1997: 281) imagines the soliloquies as a camera zooming in 'to an extreme close-up on human consciousness itself' while she considers staging scenes in a futuristic holodeck. Current virtual reality technology has a long way to go before achieving *Star Trek*-like immersion, yet Gottschall (2012: 191) sees this possibility simply as 'a technologically sophisticated version of' live action role-play. As virtual players enter the text, it is more of a journey into their minds than a journey outward through space-time.

Research contribution

Retroprojection is an extended metaphor for the spooky action in our imagination similar to what Shapiro (2010: 198) mentions as communication from beyond the grave 'every time we pick up a volume of Milton or Virgil or Dickens' yet playwrights like Shakespeare (or Webster or Stoppard) invite their audiences into the dialogue through their theatrical virtual reality. As digital technology advances throughout the 21st century, what will we learn about ourselves in relation to human history? This work suggests that interaction with the past is one of the fundamental forces in the art of theatre that Bogart (2007) identified as participation.

Research significance

Asides from the occasional Hollywood feature film or episode of *Doctor Who*, there are no recorded accounts of the roles performed by Shakespeare in his own plays. Making a play to perform on a virtual reality stage allows for many interpretations of what a performance by Shakespeare and his fellow players would have looked like. This play aims to create the same spacious mirror just as *Antony and Cleopatra*'s Caesar 'needs must see himself' (V.i).

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