

## »Memory by literature«? The mnemonic anxieties of early modern historiography

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»Burn all the records of the realm!« This is the order given by the rebel Jack Cade in Shakespeare's history play *The Contention between the two Famous Houses of Yorke and Lancaster*, also known as the second part of *King Henry VI*.<sup>1</sup> It marks a climactic moment of the rebels' fight against an unequal distribution of property and rights codified in written records. The rebellion is directed against literacy and written memory as the basis of social injustice: documents guarantee the power of the higher social ranks, while the illiteracy of the common people ensures their continuing subjugation. The political and mnemonic implications of Cade's order are spelled out in the chronicle account of the 1381 Peasant Rebellion, which served as one of Shakespeare's sources: »the rustics [...] went to further extremes and declared that all court rolls and old monuments should be burnt so that once the memory of ancient customs had been wiped out their lords would be unable to vindicate their rights over them.«<sup>2</sup> This is why the rebels seek to destroy the agents, institutions and material documents of written culture and why they wish to return to a pre-literate state of grace in which the spoken word guarantees truth and justice. Yet the rebellion fails, order and authority based on written memory are reinstated. What are we to make of this? Does Shakespeare's play support Cade's vision of an egalitarian, pre-literate society? Or does it reject the scenario of a nation without order, without writing, and without memory?

Much critical energy has been spent to determine the political affiliations of play and playwright, ranging from a conservative containment of subversive energies to a championing of resistance to authority. I would

suggest, however, that it is more profitable to shift the terms of the debate from the political rebellion to the medial revolution which this play also stages. In this view, *The Contention* explores not only the struggle between aristocracy and commoners, but a contemporary concern about literacy and orality as the media of historical memory. This debate was to a certain extent driven by an anxiety about just how reliable each medium was for the purpose of remembering the past. That purpose and its final victory over oblivion was the standard early modern argument in favour of historiography. The title

page of Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*, for example, engraved by Renold Elstracke from a design by the author himself, illustrates this idea of history triumphing over oblivion.

Following the traditional iconography, the engraving doubles as an illustration of Cicero's definition of History as »Life's Mistress«, flanked by Experience and Truth and watched by the all-seeing eye of divine Providence. The Temple of History is supported by four columns which point to her other incarnations as »Times' Witnesse«, »Herald of Antiquitie«, »Light of Truth« and »Life of Memorie«. On its roof, the figures of fama bona and fama mala pronounce man's glory and shame to posterity. At its very base rest the figures of Mors and Oblivio. The accompanying poem by Ben Jonson acknowledges this foundational position when it makes them the starting point of its praise of history: »From Death and darke Oblivion (neere the same), / The Mistress of Mans life, grave Historie, /

Raising the World to good, or Evill fame, / Doth vindicate it to Aeternitie.« (l. 1–4) The poem presents death and oblivion as the two foes which are overcome by history and left behind, thus constructing a straightforwardly teleological narrative of submission and victory.<sup>3</sup> Several other engraved frontispieces to historiographical works display a similar iconography and meaningful spatial arrangement (fig. 3 and 4).<sup>4</sup>

Yet as we shall see, forgetting was not held at bay that easily – it remained part of the historiographical picture, as it were, and caused considerable discomfort. This is the »mnemonic anxiety« my title refers to, and it keeps resurfacing in historiographical texts of various



Figure 1  
Sir Walter Raleigh: »The History of the World« (1614),  
frontispiece.

1. 4.7.12, *King Henry VI, Part 2*. Ed. by Knowles 1999. All further quotations are taken from this edition.  
2. *The Anonimale Chronicle*, quoted in de Sousa 1996, 186.

3. For a detailed reading of this frontispiece and its implications for an early modern understanding of memory and oblivion, see Döring 2008.  
4. I would like to thank Susanne Friedrich for drawing my attention to these two engravings.

genres, from chronicle histories to history plays and metahistorical tracts. In what follows I explore the complex relations between remembering and forgetting at work in early modern historiographical practice on the page as well as on the stage. At least in regard to prose histories, this relation usually manifests itself as a tension between an anxious denial of oblivion and forgetting as a constitutive force of memory. This tension can be taken as symptomatic of early modern historiographical practice. While the interplay of remembering and forgetting shapes cultural memory in any epoch, it accrues a specific dynamic and, what is more, a specific virulence in Tudor and Stuart England. This is due to the impact of the Reformation, the shift toward a modern nation state as well as to the rise of print culture.<sup>1</sup> While the first two developments appropriated historiography for their own political uses,<sup>2</sup> the latter changed the very conditions under which historical memory operated. Under the influence of these epochal transformations, historiographical practice changed considerably from the beginning of the sixteenth century on. Part of this change was an increasing awareness of the social and cultural functions of historiography, an awareness that was articulated and negotiated most explicitly in the paratextual space of prefaces, dedications and letters to the readers as well as in the newly emergent genre of meta-historical commentary. These reflections shed light on how forgetting constituted an integral part of early modern historiographical practice.

Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble Houses of Lancaster and York* (1550), another source for Shakespeare's play, provides a particularly apt starting point for our topic, since it begins with the very word »Oblivion«, highlighted by a beautifully ornate capital (see fig. 2). Hall's dedication to Prince Edward presents a lengthy, detailed meditation on the relation between remembering and forgetting as well as on the media of historiography and its social role. The first sentence already gives us a good idea of this:

Oblivion the cancard enemye to Fame and renoune the sucking serpēt of aunciēt memory, the dedly darte to the glory of princes, and the defacer of all

conquestes and notable actes, so much bare rule in the firste and secōde age of the worlde, that nothing was set out to mennes knowledge either how y<sup>e</sup> world was made either howe man and beastes wer created, or how y<sup>e</sup> worlde was destroyed by water, til father Moses had by deuine inspiraciō in the third age, inuēnted letters, the treasure of memorie, and set furth true notable bokes, to the greate comfort of all people liuing at this daie.<sup>3</sup>

From the start, the text sets up an opposition between oblivion and memory that is aligned with the distinction between oral report and written record. This medial difference is inscribed into a narrative of progress from the people of »the first and second age of the worlde«, whose origins and identity are lost to oblivion because of their incapability to record history, on to modern civilizations whose social hierarchy and moral values are preserved in and by written memory. Tracing the invention of letters, »the treasure of memory« to its origin in Judaeo-Christian tradition, Hall invests it – and his account – with cultural authority.

More important than the origins of writing and of writing history, however, are the social functions attributed to it. In suppressing »that dedly beast Oblivion«, Hall argues, historiography does no less than uphold social hierarchies and moral values: »For what diversitie is between a noble prince and a poore begger, ye a reasonable man and a brute beast, if after their death there be left of them no remembrance or token.«<sup>4</sup> Remembrance of the dead is presented here as crucial to the society of the living. The wealth of funerary rituals and rites of remembrance inherited from the Middle Ages testifies to this importance. When the Reformation abolished many of these practices of ritual remembrance, it left a vacuum which to some extent was filled by historiography. The Reformation may indeed have prompted an increasing sense of history by severing the continuity between England's past and present, thus rendering the past as radically other.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Mazzola even suggests that »Protestant iconoclasm must also be viewed as an historiographical practice, since rejecting Purgatory inspired new paradigms for human history and new limits for

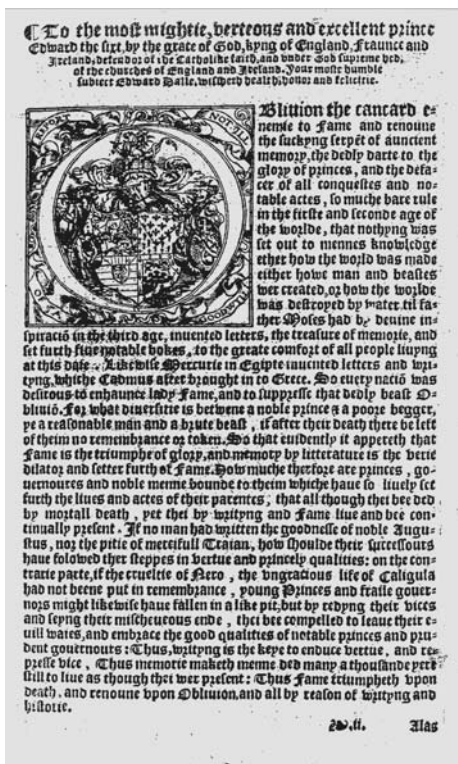


Figure 2  
Edward Hall: »The Union of the Two Noble Houses« (1550), dedication.

1. Pfister 2006.

2. For a wide range of examples, see the excellent collection edited by Kewes 2006.

3. Hall 1550, sig. A.ii<sup>r</sup>.

4. Ibid., sig. A.iii<sup>r</sup>.

5. Goodland 2005, 3.

human practice»<sup>1</sup>. This notion of historical consciousness as emerging from a sense of rupture can be traced in a contemporary comment by one of the members of the Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries that forges a causal link between Reformation and historiographical practice: »when the Pope's authority was abolished out of England [...] special care [was] had of the search of ancient Books and antiquities for manifestation unto the world of these usurpations of the Pope.«<sup>2</sup>

A second important function of historiography, habitually quoted in numerous defences, is its exemplarity. Its ability to provide the living with examples of good and bad behaviour makes it an invaluable guide to the right conduct in private life as well as in affairs of the state. This moral authority is again bound up with a medial argument in favour of written history: »So that evidently it appeareth that Fame is the triumph of glory, and memory by litterature is the verie dilator and setter forth of Fame.«<sup>3</sup> Hall stresses here the importance of the medium of the written and, by extension, of the printed word for holding up heroic conduct as well as social hierarchies and values. In doing so, he manages to deflect some of its moral authority onto the historiographer himself: »How much therefore«, he remarks suggestively, »are princes, governors and noble menne bounde to them which have so lively set forth the lives and actes of their parentes,« who, although dead and gone, are thus made present and immortal. Hall winds up his argument triumphantly with a triple row of conclusions initiated by an anaphoric »thus«, with the syntactic parallel suggesting an irresistibly logical argumentation: »Thus, wryting is the keye to enduce vertue, and repress vice. Thus memory maketh menne ded many a thousand yere still to live as though they wer present: Thus fame triumpheth upon death, and renoune upon Oblivion, and all by reason of writing and historie.« This line of argument is as teleo-

logical as its rhetoric is circular: in the beginning there was the written word, and all comes down again to writing and history.

From this argument emerges a set of binary oppositions in which writing is aligned with memory, fame, moral order and civilization, as opposed to orality, oblivion, death, chaos and wilderness. The latter part of the equation is summed up in the image »that deadly beast Oblivion« which expresses the view that forgetting is a

wild, destructive force of nature against which civilization must be defended by the arts of memory. This is the view which is indeed expressed in the founding myth of the classic *ars memoria* as told by Quintilian: the Greek poet and rhetorician Simonides attended a symposium which was cut short by the collapse of the building in an earthquake. Only Simonides escaped and was able to identify the mutilated corpses by remembering exactly the order in which the guests had been sitting. In this episode, the destruction of the building equals the destructive, catastrophic force of oblivion, while Simonides' mnemotechnics restitutes order and enables the proper commemoration of the dead. Umberto Eco, in a much-quoted essay, builds his rejection of an *ars oblivionalis* corresponding to an *ars memorativa* on precisely this oppositional view: forgetting, he claims, occurs only through accident, as a natural event, because of an illness or old age. Yet to forget deliberately, let alone through use of linguistic or material signs, is utterly impossible. Because signs work by representing what is absent, Eco concludes, they are »inherently ill-suited to stimulate forgetfulness« and hence a semiotics of forgetting is out of the question.<sup>4</sup>

However, the relation between memory and forgetting is more complicated than this dichotomous model of presence and absence, of compensation and loss, of written culture and its lack suggests. In an essay which critically engages with Eco's dismissal of an *ars oblivionalis*, the German philosopher and linguist Sybille Krämer has suggested that we move away from what she calls the traditional »model of compensation« and toward a model which conceives of remembrance and forgetting as complementary forces: they do not work against each other, but are two complementary



Figure 3  
Mercator: »Historia Mundi, or Mercator's Atlas« (1637),  
frontispiece.

1. Mazzola 1998, 10. For a detailed account of early modern practices of remembering the dead, their social functions and how they were transferred to other cultural arenas after the Reformation, see Döring 2006, in particular 24–39.
2. Quoted in Walsh 2009, 18. Jennifer Summit (2004) explores this desire to preserve written historical accounts in the wake of the dissolution of the monasteries and their libraries and shows how this was an attempt at deflecting oblivion as much as at manipulating national memory from a Protestant point of view.
3. Hall 1550, sig. A.ii<sup>r</sup>.

4. Eco 1988, 255.

processes through which cultural memory is shaped and organized. Instead of being outside of culture and opposed to writing, forgetting should be seen as a cultural force and writing as one of its techniques.<sup>1</sup>

Hall's dedication actually bears this out. For while it emphatically presents itself and the historiographical work to follow as an act of remembering, at the same time this praise of memory performs a double act of forgetting – and it does so by means of writing. First, it obliterates the memory of the rich mnemonic culture of the Middle Ages which was predominantly, if not exclusively, oral in nature. The theory and practices of the medieval *ars memoria* have been reconstructed by Mary Carruthers in her groundbreaking study *The Book of Memory* (1990). While the title of her study would seem to suggest a similar bias toward »memory by literature« as exhibited by Hall, the »book of memory« is here to be understood metaphorically: it refers to the metaphor of wax-tablets as one of the traditional images for the neuropsychological processes of remembering. Since antiquity, memory was understood as a bodily process in which perceptions received through the senses were impressed in the soft material of the brain. These impressions were likened to engravings left by a stylus in the soft wax on a writing tablet. A quote by Thomas Aquinas, highlights the metaphorical nature of the relation between writing and memory: »A thing is said metaphorically to be written on the mind of anyone when it is firmly held in memory.«<sup>2</sup> Yet when Hall speaks of »memory by literature«, he takes this metaphor literally: he reifies the medieval simile that the process of remembering works *like* the act of writing into the notion that memory *is* writing. In doing so, he narrows the wealth of medieval mnemonic techniques down to only one: memory by the book.

This reliance on literacy seems to me a distinctly early modern attitude. If I am right, then why did this shift toward literacy and written record as the privileged medium of historical memory occur? I would suggest that one factor that changes the field of mnemonic

practice considerably in the early modern period is the advent of print as a technology that facilitates the multiplication and distribution of books and book knowledge. This was seen by contemporaries – at least those directly involved in the emergent print culture – as an enhancement of personal and cultural memory. William Caxton, for example, who set up the first printing press in England, describes the purpose of his 1482 edition of the *Polychronicon*, a chronicle written by the

medieval monk Ranulf Higden, as follows: »such thynges as have ben don syth the deth or ende of the sayd boke of polychronicon [which] shold be had in remembrance and not putte in oblyuon ne forgetyng.«<sup>3</sup> Caxton sees his printing enterprise explicitly in terms of memory and oblivion. Intriguingly, his choice of phrasing and tense – »should have been had in remembrance« – suggests that the chronicle does not only store historical treasures but indeed can restore what had actually been forgotten. By the early seventeenth century, the confident equation of history and »memory by literature« had become a staple of historiographical discourse. Francis Bacon, for example, claims in his magisterial *Advancement of Learning* (1623; translated into English 1640): »Assistant to Memory is writing; and it must by all means be noted, that Memory of it selfe, without this support, would be too weake for prolix and accurate matters; wherein it could no

way recover, or recall it selfe, but by Scripture.«<sup>4</sup> Human memory was deemed not only »too weake« for more complex matters but also too prone to novelty. The metaphor of the memory as a wax tablet whose contents could be erased in order to re-inscribe new ones, illustrates this disadvantage. Hamlet's seemingly paradoxical promise that »from the table of my memory / I'll wipe away all trivial fond records« (1.5.98 f.) in order to remember solely the command to vengeance issued by his father's ghost is based on the same mnemonic principle. Likewise, the Jacobean historiographer Thomas Gataker stresses that all information imprinted in »the book and volume of [the] brain« (*Hamlet*, 1.5.104) can and will be erased to receive new information. Unlike a printed book, human memory was »not able to



Figure 4  
Johann Philipp Abelin: »Theatri Europaei« (1629),  
frontispiece.

1. Krämer 2000, 268 f.

2. *Summa Theologica*, quoted in Carruthers 1990, 8.

3. Caxton 1428, 428.

4. Bacon 1640, 253.

comprehend all that is to be recorded therein; when new things of note come to be imprinted in it, the old are wip't out.<sup>1</sup> His older contemporary, Sir Edward Coke, concludes accordingly: »It is therefore necessarie that memorable things should be committed to writing (the witnesse of times, the light and the life of truth) and not wholly be taken to slipperie memorie, which seldome yeeldeth a certaine reckoning.«<sup>2</sup> By evoking the well-known Ciceronian definition of history but attributing it here explicitly to writing, Coke effectively conflates writing with historical memory so that the art of historiography emerges as the new *ars memorativa*.

Yet despite such assertive statements, writing and, by extension, print culture brought with them mnemonic anxieties of their own. This suspicion toward writing is effectively suppressed by Hall's equation of writing as memory, and constitutes the second act of forgetting which his dedication performs. For the equation of writing with memory in turn erases the traditional topos of writing as precisely *not* a more reliable technology of remembering, but in fact as its opposite: writing promotes forgetfulness. This topos can already be found in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, in the story about the Egyptian king Thamus and Thoth, the god and inventor of (among other things) letters. When Thoth offers the art of writing to the king, his gift is rejected by Thamus on the grounds that this invention will produce forgetfulness in those who have learned it: being able to rely on what is written, they will not need to exercise their memories any more. In elaborating the charge that writing promotes forgetfulness, Plato comes up with a set of binary oppositions that exactly reverses the one we have seen operating in Hall's dedication: for Plato, it is writing that spells forgetting, absence, lack of authority, and death.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida has criticized this thinking in oppositions in a famous essay; it is well known enough not to need rehearsal here.<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to recall that Derrida argues that these seemingly natural differences are in fact the result of a prior act of differentiation that produces them in the first place. And because this differentiation is brought about artificially, it is never stable but requires constant repetition to keep the oppositional terms in place. I think that Derrida's reading of Plato's story is helpful here because it alerts us to the possibility that Hall's set of binary oppositions likewise is neither naturally given nor stable, although he presents it as both. Rather, it is the result of an act of differentiation that brings its key terms, memory and culture, into being. By this logic, forgetting is not outside or opposite to remembering, but is itself part of the complementary process that brings about and shapes cultural memory. What we can ob-

serve in Hall's dedication, then, is the very attempt to separate writing and forgetting in the first place, to set it up *as* a stable opposition.

Yet even in this early modern text which speaks so confidently about the merits of writing and in particular of historiography, an anxiety about the oblivional capacities of writing surfaces for a brief moment. In a passage that reviews the few extant written histories of England, Hall remarks regarding the medieval chronicler John Froissart that he wrote »so compendiously and so largely« about English history that the very scope of his work inspires suspicion: »But I haue redde an old Prouerbe, which saithe, that in many woordes, a lye or twayne sone may scape.«<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Hall relies here on oral tradition, a proverb, in order to voice a critique of written culture which is quite at odds with his faith in historiography exhibited everywhere else in his dedication.

What we can see at work here is a tension between an assertion of writing as the proper, most reliable medium of historical memory on the surface and an underlying anxiety that writing may in fact manipulate or even erase the memory of the past. This mnemonic anxiety surrounding written culture typically surfaces as a contention between literacy and orality, in which the victory of writing is a foregone conclusion. This medial contention is explored in Shakespeare's history play, to which I want to return for the rest of this essay. I began with the rebels' call to »burn all the records of the realm«; yet despite this instance of a strident anti-literacy opposed to written and oral culture, memory and forgetting, authority and rebellion, the play neither just rehearses nor simply reverses these oppositions. Instead, it stages the capacities of each medium to record historical truth; and in doing so, it shows that both written records and oral report can be used to manipulate, distort and appropriate the »historical truth« for one's own interests. In other words, it does not so much express a suspicion toward one or the other medium, as we have seen in Hall's preface and Plato's anecdote respectively; rather, since both media can be manipulated, it expresses suspicion toward the notion of historical truth itself. This raises the urgent question of the role that power plays for cultural memory. As one critic puts it: »Literacy, in this context, becomes the metaphor for the power of the dominant culture, the power to make history.«<sup>5</sup>

Neither rejecting nor embracing literacy in unqualified terms, the play differentiates between the power *of* writing, which is acknowledged throughout, and the power *over* writing, which is viewed with considerable distrust. This suspicion centres on the authority that the written word yields over the present as well as the past:

1. Preface to *An anniversarie memoriall of Englands delivery from the Spanish invasion* (1626); quoted in Woolf 2004, 263.  
2. Quoted in *ibid.*, 262.  
3. Derrida [1972] 1998.

4. Hall 1550, sig. A.iii<sup>v</sup>.  
5. De Sousa 1996, 180.

access to writing determines one's position and privileges in the social hierarchy just as it allows one to determine historical memory in one's favour. Each time the power of writing is evoked in the play, it is shadowed by an anxiety about the power over writing.

Already at the very outset of the play, the peace contract which the Duke of Suffolk has negotiated with France *à propos* the marriage of King Henry VI and the French princess Margaret and which results in the loss of two continental territories opens up the two dimensions. The written document's performative power is considerable: it establishes peace, transfers territories and memorializes these steps as part of national history. Interestingly, this is presented as an act of remembering as well as of forgetting. Outraged by the terms of the treaty, the Duke of Gloucester sounds a patriotic lament:

O peers of England, shameful is this league;  
Fatal this marriage, cancelling your fame,  
Blotting your names from books of memory,  
Razing the characters of your renown,  
Defacing monuments of conquered France,  
Undoing all, as all had never been! (1.1.95–100)

The contract blots out the memory of England's glorious victories, won by Henry V just a generation before, and reinscribes shame instead. The result is a realignment of political, national and geographical memory which is explicitly couched in the language of oblivion: cancelling, blotting, razing, defacing, undoing are the operative verbs here, which suggests that forgetting is seen as an active force. Moreover, this forgetting is not, as Eco would have it, an uncontrollable, catastrophic force of nature; on the contrary, it is brought about through the ritualized social practices of a marriage and a peace contract. While the scene thus affirms the power of this piece of writing, it criticizes at the same time that Suffolk has shamefully abused his power over its terms. Such an awareness of the potential abuses of the power over writing necessarily qualifies the value of historical records themselves. Only a few lines after Gloucester's lament, York, who rejects the marriage contract for far more selfish reasons, explicitly references chronicle sources to lend authority to his position: »I never read but England's kings have had / Large sums of gold and dowries with their wives« (1.1.125 f.). And in 2.2., a scene whose recitation of genealogical trees is taken directly from Hall, Holinshed and Stow, the phrase »As I have read« (2.2.40) is supposed to lend credibility to Salisbury's support, *pace* the chronicles, of York's claim to the throne. These scenes affirm the belief in the power of written history and speak about its political uses for legitimating political authority. That York is the arch-villain of the play foregrounds the fact that this authority is not necessarily coupled with justice or truth.

The nobility's abuse of their absolutist power is further showcased when several commoners produce

petitions in which their grievances and calls for justice are recorded. »Let's stand close«, urges one of the petitioners, »My lord Protector will come this way by and by, and then we may deliver our supplications in the quill« (1.3.1–3). Yet instead of the »good man«, Duke Humphrey, it is the Queen and Suffolk who appear. Much less inclined to protect the commoners' interests than their own, they are biased judges. The Queen spitefully tears up a supplication because it is directed to the Lord Protector as the most powerful arbiter of the realm instead of to the king or herself (38–42). Suffolk even stand accused himself: one of the petitions is »Against the Duke of Suffolk, for enclosing the commons of Melford« (20 f.) and another promises to disclose a usurper, which prompts a suspiciously nervous reaction from Suffolk: exclaiming »Who is there?«, he »[Snatches Peter's supplication]« and orders the petitioner to be arrested (33–36). Unjustly appropriating and destroying supplications, the nobles exert here an arbitrary power over the written word. One might argue that this scene shows writing as an instrument of domination: the commoners are forced to submit their petitions in written legal form, »in the quill«, which would have involved the costly services of a clerk. While this is undoubtedly true, I would argue that it also shows the power of writing as an instrument in the hands of the commoners: having entered the legal process, their supplications become official documents that have the power to indict members of the nobility. That the petitioners submit them »in the quill« also means that they do so »in a body; in concert; together«, which evokes an image of solidarity among the lower classes.<sup>1</sup> That the quill as an instrument of writing can become a weapon of rebellion in the hand of the lower classes is proleptically suggested by the first description we get of Cade. In 3.1., the Machiavellian villain York sounds Cade's potential as an instrument for his stage-managed rebellion by recalling how in an earlier uprising, he »fought so long till that his thighs with darts / Were almost like a sharp-quill'd porpentine« (3.1.362 f.). Darts become quills, but the bows from which they were shot are actually those of the rebellious Irish kerns (light foot soldiers), while Cade fought on the side of the English colonial masters, just as his own rebellion in the play will be master-minded by a member of the English nobility. The politics of writing are therefore presented as highly ambiguous: the word, proverbially mightier than the sword, can be seized by those in power as well as the underprivileged classes. It is not clearly associated with either but is an instrument in the struggle for power.

Having learned from painful experience that political power can be derived from power over the written word, the rebels also try to make the power of the written word work for them. Their efforts, however, fail

1. The OED cites *2 Henry VI* as the first recorded example for meaning 2.) »in the (or a) quill: in a body; in concert; together. to jump in quill: to act simultaneously or in harmony.«

when their leader reverts to reliance on oral memory. In 4.4. the rebels themselves send a supplication to the king which lists their grievances and claims. King Henry reacts in kind by sending another written document, an amnesty, that grants »free pardon to all of them who will forsake« Cade (4.8.9 f.). The king's amnesty – a word that translates literally as »not remembering« – constitutes a complex act of forgetting and remembering: it promises to erase the memory of the rebellion and at the same time rallies the English people to »The name of Henry the Fifth« (17, 56), uniting them against »The fearful French, whom you late vanquished« (42). Yet Cade, true to his revolutionary programme that aims at throwing out written culture along with its exploitation by the upper classes, counters by invoking the much older, unwritten memory of the »ancient freedom« (26) which the common people held before the Norman conquest in 1066. Appealing »against the internal enemy, the Anglo-Norman, whose yoke of foreign aristocracy bore heavily over an indigenous Saxon yeomanry«<sup>1</sup>, this memory fuses with Cade's utopian vision of an egalitarian, pre-literate society. But the king's power over present and past, shored up by his command over the records of the realm, is greater than Cade's, and the rebels, accepting the royal vision of Englishness and patriotic obedience along with the royal amnesty, desert Cade.

These examples have shown, I hope, how writing can be a means of erasing historical memory, and how the mnemonic effectiveness of either written or oral memory is not an inherent feature of the medium itself but rather a function of the power held by those who employ it medium for their own mnemonic projects. In a last step, I would like to discuss how Shakespeare's play not only thematizes how historical memory can be constructed and reconstructed through medial re-presentation, but how in order to foreground this concern with memory and the media of history the play itself reconstructs its own historical sources considerably. This reconstruction occurs through additions and subtractions to the medieval chronicle material, thus actively shaping what is staged as national memory. In other words, *The Contention* is not only about forgetting: it performs itself acts of forgetting that form cultural memory.

As many critics have noted, Shakespeare's rebel scenes conflate the memory of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt under Jack Straw and Wat Tyler with that of the late medieval figure of Jack Cade in 1450 as well as more recent apprentice riots of the later sixteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, Shakespeare strips them of their

historical specificity so that they reflect the mnemonic anxieties about literacy, history and power around 1600. Take, for example, the historical Jack Cade: in most sources, he is described as a well-educated, agreeable young man who does not display any hostility toward written culture. The concern about literacy and its abuses is imported from the 1381 Peasant Rebellion which was directed at the institutions and representatives of an oppressive system of written legal documents. That concern is added not only to the 1450 Jack Cade-rebellion but to almost every other historical episode which the play stages.

The conspiracy, exposure and punishment of Duke Humphrey's wife, Eleanor Cobham, is another case in point. The chronicle source is conspicuously silent about the connection between writing, power and historical memory which Shakespeare's play explores through this figure. Edward Hall merely records that the Duchess »was accused of treason, for that she, by sorcery and enchauntment, entended to destroy the kyng« and that she had to »do open penance, in iij. open places, within the city of London«.<sup>3</sup> In Shakespeare's play, however, reading and writing are foregrounded as part of the occult ritual through which Lady Eleanor seeks to determine the fate of her enemies and her chances for becoming queen:

Mother Jourdain, be you prostrate and grovel on the earth;  
John Southwell, read you; and let us to our work.  
[...]  
Here do the ceremonies belonging, and make the circle;  
*Bolingbroke or Southwell reads, 'Conjuro te' etc.,*  
*It thunders and lightens terribly; then the Spirit riseth.*  
(1.4.11 f., 22.1–3)

Written words read aloud have the power to raise a ghost. The questions posed to the devilish spirit as well as the answers given are in turn, according to stage directions, conspicuously recorded. They are again read out aloud when the Duke of York arrests the conspirators and confiscates the records of their sabbath as incriminating evidence for the trial (59–69). And when Lady Gloucester is publicly exposed afterwards, she has »[verses written on her back and pinned on]« which intensify her punishment: »Methinks I should not be led along, / Mailed up in shame, with papers on my back, / And followed with a rabble.« (2.4.30–32) As in the opening scene, a piece of writing inscribes shame and blots out the memory of her former dignity as wife of the Lord Protector. What is more, her »shameful yoke« (37), fixed in writing, will be all that is remembered of her, as Duke Humphrey recognizes: even if he could spare his wife this public display, »yet thy scandal were not wiped away« (65) from the books of memory.

1. Shakespeare 1999, 97.

2. De Sousa 1996 sums up the well known argument of the conflation of the historical Jack Cade's rebellion of 1450 with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in the play; for a reading of Shakespeare's Cade in the context of the 1591 Hacket rising, see Fitter 2004.

3. Hall 1550, 101.

There are two further references to the magical power of written words and how they cast their spell in law. Writing is, unsurprisingly, associated with witchcraft by the illiterate rebels. When they arrest the clerk from Chartham and discover that he carries »a book in his pocket with red letters in't«, Cade concludes without hesitation: »Nay, then, he is a conjuror« (4.2.83 f.). This is coupled with the accusation that the clerk is an agent of the law: »Nay, he can make obligations and write courthand« (85 f.). The parallel syntax of these charges implies a logical parallel between conjuring and the ability to draw up legally binding documents. Superstitious belief in the magical power of writing is not restricted to women or the lower classes, but is also evoked by male members of the nobility. When Suffolk is caught by pirates on his way into exile, the Duke angrily challenges one of them whom he recognizes as a former bondsman of his: »This hand of mine hath writ in thy behalf / And therefore shall it charm thy riotous tongue.« (4.1.63 f.) The struggle between outlawed nobleman and lawless pirate is couched in terms of a contest between literacy and orality, remembering and forgetfulness. Suffolk tries to reinstate the feudal relationship in which his power over writing legitimizes his power over the socially inferior, illiterate bondsman. Yet the scene takes place in a legal vacuum, on board of a pirate ship and between two persons who exist outside the law. In this context, the power of writing is suspended and all that remains is the brute force of violent words. A Lieutenant responds to Suffolk's arrogant challenge, »let my words stab him, as he has me«, whereupon Suffolk scoffs: »Base slave, thy words are blunt, and so art thou.« (66 f.) The spoken word, however, wins over written ones in this scene. This, as well as the fact that the Lieutenant acts as eloquent spokesperson for the commoners' grievances (75–103), points forward to the immediately following scenes of Cade's rebellion with its radical rejection of both literacy and the law which serves the upper classes.

What does this mean for our topic of how historical memory is mediated and shaped, and in particular for the role which the early modern theatre played in this process? I would like to suggest that this play about English medieval history speaks not only of the events of that past but also, and perhaps even primarily, of issues and concerns of the present. Such a topical reading was indeed the dominant mode of perceiving history in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period: history functioned as a mirror or example for the present. As Jonathan Frow comments in a different context, each reconstruction of the past (such as Shakespeare's play) is inevitably shaped by conditions and constraints determined by the present.<sup>1</sup> What then were the »conditions and constraints« of the Elizabethan audience's present? To whom or for whom is Cade speaking when he gives order »to burn all the records of the

realm« (4.7.12 f.), or when he upbraids Lord Saye: »Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school [and] thou hast caused printing to be used and [...] built a paper mill« (23–34)? Print, paper-mills and grammar schools would have been anachronistic phenomena in 1450, the time of the historical Jack Cade, and even more so in the time of the 1381 Peasant Rising which provides the main source for the rebels' anti-literacy.<sup>2</sup> What Shakespeare's Cade articulates here, then, are late Elizabethan concerns about the pervasive economic, legal and educational impact written culture had on everyday life, and by which the illiterate classes saw themselves increasingly disadvantaged.<sup>3</sup> In the light of the Tudor »reading revolution« (Kevin Sharpe), during which more than 400 grammar schools sprang up, Cade's anti-literacy, rather than speaking for the common people who probably esteemed and desired the acquisition of literacy as enabling their own social aspirations, may well have articulated aristocratic anxieties about upward social mobility.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the topical reading does not only extend to the issues the play ostensibly speaks about, such as rebellion and the abuse of power by a selfish aristocracy. I think we can also profitably employ the perception habit of topicality to describe the acts of remembering and forgetting which the play itself performs. The context of the Reformation as one of the most pressing concerns of the Elizabethan present is important here: the repeated confessional change – from Catholicism to Protestantism under Henry VIII and Edward VI, back to the Catholic faith under Mary and again to a more moderate Anglican position under Elizabeth – was accompanied by a concerted, often violent, destruction of religious symbols and monastic houses, the abolishment of Catholic doctrines and rites, and the erasure of Saints' days from the official calendar (to say nothing of the hundreds of believers who were executed as heretics because they did not adhere to the official confession of the day). The erasure and adjustment of popular memory through the Reformation adds another level of topical reference: a concern about memory and the forces that shape it.

In this context, *The Contention* is not only a play about medieval and Elizabethan political culture. It is also a play about the very process of making history, a process informed by acts of remembering as well as of forgetting. In this sense, the mnemonic projects *in* the play correspond to the mnemonic project *of* the play, for the ruptures in the social order which are staged in the scenes of popular rebellion can be seen as a staging of the ruptures in cultural memory brought about by the readjustments of the Reformation. In exhibiting the mnemonic anxieties that surround the political and

2. Linton 1996, 16.

3. Smith 2008, 69.

4. Fitter 2004, 198 f.

1. Frow 1997, 229.



medial conditions of remembering the past, the early modern theatre functions as a meta-medium in which the nature of history as well as the role of remembering and forgetting in the formation of historical memory are held up for critique and consideration.

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