Speaking History:
Linguistic Memory and the Usable Past
in the Early Modern History Play

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ABSTRACT In this essay, Lucy Munro focuses on a very specific example of the way in which the present made the past a reality: the imitation of archaic words and styles in the history plays of Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton, Anthony Munday, and others. All speakers of English—no matter their social status—came into contact with old words, and dramatists capitalized on the capacity that these fragments of earlier practices had to conjure the past in the present. Unlike the modern historical novel, however, early modern history plays do not aim to represent the past in a verisimilar manner. Instead, works such as Shakespeare’s 2 Henry IV and Henry V mingle archaism with neologism so as to critique particular perspectives and modes of behavior in both the historical past and the present day. Manipulating linguistic memory, they suggest that the past was open to appropriation and revision, not only by elite writers but also by the popular stage and its spectators.

KEYWORDS: archaism in early modern history plays; character of Ancient Pistol in Shakespeare’s plays; Anthony Munday; Thomas Middleton; William Sampson

TOWARD THE END OF WILLIAM SAMPSON’S PLAY The Vow-Breaker, or The Fair Maid of Clifton (1625–36), Elizabeth I visits Nottingham and ponders the city’s request to make the Trent “navigable to Gainsborough / So to Boston, Kingston, Humber, and Hull.”¹ In order to provide her with the information that she needs to

¹. The Vow Breaker. Or, The Faire Maide of Clifton In Nотinghamshire as it hath beene Divers Times Acted by Severall Companies with Great Applause (London, 1636), I4v. Titles of primary texts are standardized and, in most cases, modernized, in the main text, but given in their original form when early editions are cited in the notes. The play’s auspices are uncertain, but performances possibly took place in or around Nottingham; on its use of its setting, see Julie Sanders, The Cultural Geography of Early Modern Drama, 1620–1650 (Cambridge, 2010), 44, 117–20.
make the decision, the Mayor must set out the historical basis for the city’s claim. Hesitating, he complains, “I must speake Historiography, History I should say, but these hard words cloy my stomacke, like lumpes of Bacon,” before finally setting out the city’s history:

Thus it was,

Edward the first from whom we beare our armes,
Three Crownes displaièd in an Azure feilde,
First, ’gan to make our River navigable,
Small barks it bore, but not of that full weight,
That were transportable for our affaires,
In the two Edwards the second, and third,
Vnto the second Richard it continu’d
Till Bulling-brooke began! then Harry the fift,
And Pearcy fell at odds; in which division,
Dividing of the land; Glendower began
To stop the water-courses of flowing Trent,
By that meanes our navigable course was stop’d,
And where before we usually transported
With things un-numerous from Hull to us!
And in returne releiv’d the neighbour coaste,
With fuell, and commodities of great use.
As Wooll, Lead, Corne, fruits, and Iron;
We now have nether; but with double cost,
This is the cause why we entreate your Grace
To signe our pattent, and by St Lucy, Besse;
Wee’le pray for thee, and that’s thy full reward.

(I4v–K1r, accent added)

What interests me here is not the specific detail of the Mayor’s claim but the form in which it is expressed and his self-consciousness about “speak[ing] [ . . . ] History.” The Mayor customarily speaks in vigorous, colloquial prose, but in setting out the city’s history, he moves not only into blank verse but also into a different register, using poetic vocabulary (“displaièd in an Azure feilde”) and elisions (“’gan”), stilted syntax (“Small barks it bore”), and polysyllabic words such as “transportable,” “navigable” and “un-numerous.” To speak history is, apparently, to mimic the style of Elizabethan verse chronicles, with their lofty tone and almost incantatory recitation of the names of kings and memorable locations.

The Mayor’s speech is an example of linguistic and literary archaism—that is, the deliberate adoption of forms of speech that would have registered as old-fashioned or outmoded to the speaker’s audience. In the context of The Vow-Breaker, with its Elizabethan setting, the speech’s style has some historical justification. However, its
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In the dramatic fiction is more complex than it might seem. Like other early modern history plays, *The Vow-Breaker* has little interest in creating consistently authentic diction for its characters; indeed, Sampson draws attention to the stylistic oddity of this speech in the Mayor’s anxious statement “I must speake Historiography, History I should say.” The aim is not to represent faithfully the play’s Elizabethan milieu; instead, the Elizabethan form of the verse chronicle is manipulated by a character within the fiction, as a means of representing and negotiating with history itself. Thus, although this speech might seem to have much in common with the authenticating linguistic strategies adopted by writers of historical fiction from Sir Walter Scott onward, its concerns are rather different. Here, archaism is not a technique that aims merely to bring the past to life; instead, it puts it to work.

Taking *The Vow-Breaker*’s attempt to “speake [...] History” as its starting point, this essay explores early modern endeavors to use and manipulate a very specific piece of the past: its language. Outmoded words and styles were aspects of the past that touched all speakers of English, whether through plays, popular songs, or the language of the Bible. Further, they were a crucial means through which ordinary people might use the past to structure their experience and draw connections across time. Like the old trees that Nicola Whyte discusses in her essay in this special issue, old words were both signs of a past age and markers around which particular understandings of past and present clustered; they were linguistic relics that could nonetheless spring to new life, gathering with them a range of associations and emotions. Archaism depends on temporal distance, since a word or linguistic convention must generally be old before it can be outmoded, but it also requires a word to survive into living memory, whether its survival be through a form of oral tradition—ballads, for example, or other forms of song—through dialect, or through written texts. Linguistic memory is thus a form of cultural memory that straddles high and low stations of society, and oral and written texts.

The popular theater of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries made especially productive use of archaism, depending not only on spectators’ ability to distinguish outmoded forms of language from present-day counterparts, but also on their awareness—on some level at least—of the historical and cultural changes that had occurred over the same period of time. While early modern plays have survived as written texts, they were originally encountered by audiences in an oral form, and they were available to illiterate and semiliterate spectators alike in ways that more elite texts were not; in addition, as a number of researchers have noted, orality is often crucial to their effect. As *The Vow-Breaker* suggests in its depiction of the Elizabethan mayor

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3. For recent reappraisals of this issue, see *Oral Traditions and Gender in Early Modern Literary Texts*, ed. Mary Ellen Lamb and Karen Bamford (Aldershot, U.K., 2008); and Ian Munro, “Page Wit and Puppet-like Wealth: Orality and Print in *Three Lords and Three Ladies of London*,” in *Locating the
and his painstaking account of regional history, the dramatists who composed plays on English history were particularly alert to archaism’s potential as a means of exploring the relationship between past and present. There are a number of interrelated reasons for this. First, archaism is suited thematically to these plays, even though it is rarely used to create a verisimilar or authentic portrait of past times. Second, plays on English history are often self-conscious about language, and about the English language in particular, drawing on contemporary debates about linguistic identity and renewal. Moreover, as Dermot Cavanagh points out, in the sixteenth-century history play “language falls subject to time and to competing forms of appropriation and definition.”

Third, archaism itself had a vexed place within early modern historical writing, and the question of whether outmoded diction should be incorporated into historical narrative was actively debated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In plays on English history written by Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton, Anthony Munday, and others, the past is made awkwardly and materially “real.” It is nonetheless simultaneously presented as a stylistically hybrid construct, a space for the construction and contestation of historical, social, and cultural memory. This effect depends not on straightforward verisimilitude but on a self-conscious artificiality that denotes a more complex view of temporality and history.

The forms of archaism examined here depend on the temporality of language and style, and the capacity of words and other linguistic and literary forms to gather both historical and affective resonances as they travel through time. In this respect, archaic language is like the “untimely matter” that has been described by Jonathan Gil Harris, who notes that

[m]any “Renaissance” objects were not of the Renaissance as such but survivals from an older time: think, for example, of the medieval monastic garments that, post-Reformation, were recycled for display in the public playhouses; or of London’s old Roman walls, still visible in Shakespeare’s lifetime alongside subsequent additions and renovations. Such polytemporal objects—of the English Renaissance, yet not of it—might be characterized as untimely matter.

We might liken the archaic metrical form of the Skeltonic to the recycled monastic garment, or a phrase in Old English to London’s Roman walls; each is a historical survivor, a polytemporal fragment. In the late Elizabethan history play, archaic words and forms
have the effect of creating not a smoothly verisimilar linguistic pattern but a disruptive and disjunctive temporal mixture.

This essay is divided into three sections. First, I explore the contested place of archaism in historical writing, examining historians' concerns about style in their works, and the anxieties that the introduction of authentically antique voices periodically aroused. Polydore Vergil's paraphrase of Cicero's *De oratore*, “[t]he perfection of an historie resteth in matter and wordes,” was a sentiment shared by his contemporaries and successors, but the precise nature of the relationship between these two elements was often less than self-evident. Archaisms, in the shape of the incorporation of quotation from earlier texts, offered one way of providing an impression of “truth” and authenticity within historical narrative, but it was a technique that did not easily cohere with historians' notions of either truthful plainness or stylistic decorum. I then place these debates in the context of a wider Elizabethan concern about the aesthetic and instrumental uses and shortcomings of archaism.

The second section of this essay, which surveys the variety of uses of outmoded style in the early modern history play, demonstrates that, whereas elite forms of historical writing often resisted using archaism, the popular theater had few such qualms. Examples of archaism in these plays include the use of single words, such as “alderliefest” and “y-clad” in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI* (Pembroke's Men, 1590–92); complete phrases, such as the Old English watchword uttered by the Saxon invader Hengist in Thomas Middleton's *Hengist, King of Kent, or the Mayor of Queenborough* (King's Men, 1619–20); mixtures of archaic words and syntax, such as the faux-chivalric diction of Pistol in such works as Shakespeare's *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V* (Chamberlain's Men, 1596–99); outmoded verse forms, as in the distinctively ramshackle Skeltonic verse given to the character “John Skelton” in Anthony Munday's *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington* (Admiral's Men, 1598); and the incorporation of extended quotations from genuine Tudor morality plays in *Sir Thomas More* (auspices uncertain, ca. 1601), to which Munday, Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood, and Shakespeare all appear to have contributed.7 Plays share with nondramatic histories the capacity to bring the past to life through archaism; unlike nondramatic texts, they can also actively rematerialize and re-embody the past through the act of staging itself. Simultaneously, however, dramatic archaism flaunts its artificiality and undermines the very notion of authenticity, the disjunction between outmoded and current forms of English within the same dramatic fiction serving to remind spectators of the constructed nature of both theatrical and historical narrative.


The third section develops these ideas by focusing on one of the most intriguing examples of archaism in the early modern history play: the immensely popular figure of Pistol, who appears in 2 Henry IV and Henry V. Pistol is temporally aberrant in his language—which combines archaism with neologism—and in the disjuncture between his pretensions to archaic chivalry and his actual behavior. A wholly fictional character, he has an odd relationship with historical narrative in both 2 Henry IV and Henry V; although he is marginal even to the tavern world in 2 Henry IV, he becomes increasingly central in Henry V, eventually functioning in one surviving version of the text as an uncomfortable reminder of all that the king is supposed to have put behind him. To take Pistol’s language seriously is, perhaps, to take him seriously, too, and to acknowledge the impact of this temporally dissonant figure on the representation of the past in the plays in which he appears. In this way, archaism played on the linguistic knowledge of ordinary spectators, capitalizing on their ingrained awareness of what belonged to the past and what to the present.

Writing History
As we have seen, in writing that “[t]he perfection of an historie resteth in matter and words,” Polydore Vergil echoes Cicero’s strictures on style in De oratore. Cicero’s specific requirements are that “the kind of language and type of style to be followed are the easy and the flowing, which run their course with unvarying current and a certain placidity, avoiding alike the rough speech we use in Court and the advocate’s stinging epigrams.”8 Vergil adapts this formula to instruct his reader that “[t]he tenour of the wordes [in a history] asketh a brefe perspicuite and sincere trueth, with moderate and peaceable ornamentes” (fol. xx verso). Whereas Cicero advocates “the easy and the flowing,” Virgil demands plainness and concision, and many later writers follow him in seeing rhetorical flourish as incompatible with the “truth” necessary to history. Indeed, the chronicle history was sometimes accused of eschewing even Vergil’s “moderate and peaceable ornamentes.” As Daniel R. Woolf notes, chronicles were charged with barbarity of style,9 and Charles Aleyne could complain in his 1638 verse history of the reign of Henry VII that his sources had let him down by not describing Henry’s defeat of Lambert Simnel and his supporters in sufficient detail:

But how they fought is told so nakedly,
As if the writers of those times had layd
A blanke in that part of the History,
To let the moderns guesse what should be sayd
For Chronicles doe it so lamely tell,
As if twere sayd, they came, they fought, they fell.10

10. The Historie of that Wise and Fortunate Prince, Henrie of that Name the Seventh, King of England (London, 1638), 47; for comment see Woolf, Reading History, 25.
A robust defense of the plain style is mounted by contributors to the last great Elizabethan chronicle history, Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577, 1587). Holinshed himself asserts, “[m]y speech is playne, vvithout any Rethoricall shevve of Eloquence, hauing rather a regarde to simple truth, than to decking vvordes,”¹¹ and there is something wearily dogmatic about William Harrison’s claim in the preface to one of his contributions to the *Chronicles,*

*I neuer made any choise of stile, or picked wordes, neither regarded to handle this Treatize in such precise order and methode as many other woulde: thinking it sufficient, truely & plainly to set forth such things as I minded to intreate of, rather then with vaine affectation of eloquence to paint out a rotten sepulchre, neither commendable in a writer nor profitable to the reader.*¹²

Harrison’s image of the rotten sepulcher vividly encapsulates his unease with rhetorical ornament in historical writing, but this was not an anxiety that many later historians seem to have shared.

If Stuart historians rejected the functional style of the chronicles, two options were open to them. The first was to pursue smoothness and rhetorical effect; as Woolf comments, Stuart historians such as John Hayward, Samuel Daniel, Francis Godwin, and Francis Bacon “mined from the chronicles the ore that they refined in their own works […] they translated the clipped, rough annals of the past into elegant Latin or vigorous, readable English.”¹³ Similar techniques had already been pursued in Elizabethan verse history. When George Puttenham advises historical poets to represent “as it were in a glasse the liuely image of our deare forefathers, their noble and vertuous maner of life, with other things autentike, which because we are not able otherwise to attaine to the knowledge of, by any of our sences, we apprehend them by memory,” he did not mean that they should mirror the roughness of their sources. Instead, he argues that the historical poet should adopt “an higher stile fit for his subiect,” and he praises the use of hexameters in classical epic.¹⁴

The second option was to attempt to incorporate to a greater extent the voices of the past, “authentic” in a sense that Puttenham apparently elides, through direct quotation. Although this technique is occasionally found in the chronicles—many of which include, for example, phrases in Old English when dealing with the Saxon invasion—it is generally associated with antiquarian writers. In the 1607 revision of *Britannia,* a work first published in 1586, William Camden foregrounds and defends his interest in “antiquitie.” Of his use of sources within the book he writes, “I haue poored vpon many an old Rowle, and Evidence: and produced their testimonie (as beyond all exception)

¹². Ibid., *2v.
¹³. *Reading History,* 34.
when the cause required, in their very owne words (although barbarous they be) that the honor of veritie might in no wise be impeached.”15 He acknowledges, however, that this procedure is controversial, commenting that “some there are which wholy contemne and avile this study of Antiquity as a back-looking curiosity.”16 To quote sources in “their very owne words” is to flaunt one’s interest in antiquity, and to risk stylistic incoherence or even the barbarity of incorrect usage or poor orthography. It is for this reason that Nicholas Bodrugan pleads that he had no choice but to “vse the wordes of the historie, in whiche I am restrained by promise of an Epitome,”17 and John Speed defends his use of quotation as an alternative form of stylistic decorum: “The forme of that renunciation, as being obsolete, you shall haue in the like obsolete words of Treuisa.”18 Likewise, it is no coincidence that a dramatic representation of an antiquary, Moth in William Cartwright’s Oxford University comedy The Ordinary (ca. 1636), should speak in a highly wrought pastiche of Middle English, complete with quotations from Chaucer’s works, and should quote phrases in Old English at moments of emotional strain.

Elsewhere, scholars questioned whether obsolete language was even properly “English.” In The Scholar’s Medley (1614), Richard Brathwaite is prepared to admit that “Ancient Records are necessarily inserted in Histories,” but he places strict boundaries around their use: they must be “supported by truth, including a necessary relation to the subject whereof [the historian] intreats. Otherwise, such Antiquities (as for self-pleasing) are produced, expresse nothing.”19 Revising the text in 1638 as A Survey of History, Brathwaite argues that “[s]uch Words then beseeme an Historian best, which are proper and native,” and in support of this claim he cites classical authority: “[s]uch as were obsolete or out of use were much distasted of our Historians of ancient time.”20 For Brathwaite, as for many of his contemporaries, to incorporate obsolete words into one’s writing was to endanger its status both as classically sanctioned scholarship and as “proper and native” English.

As this suggests, anxieties about both aesthetic and national belonging are intrinsic to early modern debates about the uses of archaism. At the same time as historians were debating the proper use of English within historical texts, other commentators were debating the historical and national basis of the language itself. While many agreed that English needed to be renewed if it was to achieve the literary status of clas-
sical Greek and Latin, or modern vernaculars such as Italian, they differed over the ways in which this might be achieved. Some writers argued that English should adopt loan words from classical languages or modern vernaculars, but an influential group of mid-sixteenth-century “archaizers,” including John Cheke and Thomas Smith, insisted that English should instead look to its own past, and to the work of such writers as Chaucer and Gower.21

The best-known, and most influential, expression of this stance can be found in E. K.’s letter to Gabriel Harvey, printed as the preface to Edmund Spenser’s archaizing pastoral The Shepheardes Calender in 1579.22 E. K. promotes archaism as part of a program of linguistic renewal, and a means of restoring to English writers their national heritage; he writes:

[I]n my opinion it is one special prayse, of many which are dew to this Poete, that he hath laboured to restore, as to theyr rightfull heritage such good and naturall English words, as haue ben long time out of vse and almost cleare disherited. Which is the onely cause, that our Mother tonge, which truly of it self is both ful enough for prose and stately enough for verse, hath long time ben counted most bare and barrein of both.23

In contrast with Brathwaite, who implies that obsolete words are not “proper and native,” E. K. represents archaism as the neglected heritage of all English speakers. Proclaiming the self-sufficiency of English, he argues that those who would incorporate “peces and rags of other languages” merely make “our English tongue, a gallimaufray or hodgepodge of al other speches” (lines 86, 90–91). Instead of a national “gallimaufray,” E. K. proposes a temporal hybrid, a form of English that draws on the best of the old and the new.

Some of E. K.’s comments have direct relevance for the question of archaism’s place in the writing of history. He argues that archaic words “bring great grace and, as one would say, auctoritie to the verse,” writing, “I am of opinion, and eke the best learned are of the lyke, that those aucient solemne words are a great ornament both in


the one and in the other; the one labouring to set forth in hys worke an eternall image of antiquitie, and the other carefully discoursing matters of grauitie and importaunce” (lines 42–43, 47–52). Archaic words are valuable because they give antiquity and a solemn heft to a piece of writing, qualities that might in some contexts be thought appropriate to historical writing. And while E. K. praises archaism for its part in Spenser’s “dewe obseruing of Decorum” (line 20) in pastoral poetry, which dealt with humble subject matter, Spenser was himself to use archaism’s capacity to be not merely earthy but grave and antique in his epic The Faerie Queene.

As we have seen, E. K.’s wholehearted support of archaism was not shared by the writers of prose history; however, it left its mark on historical poetry. In the 1590s, the writers of some historical verse found a model for the high style in The Faerie Queene, and they adopted some of its archaizing techniques. In George Peele’s The Honour of the Garter (1593), for instance, the power of the Black Prince is evoked in part through the use of such archaic words as “hent” and the careful deployment of alliteration:

He one [sic] a cole-black Coorser mounted was,
And in his hand a battel-axe he hent:
His Beuer vp, his Corslet was of Steele,
Varnisht as black as Iett: 24

Like Spenser himself, the authors of historical poetry do not use archaism in pursuit of historical authenticity; instead, they make use of its aesthetic effect and, in particular, its estranging grandeur. The writers of history plays offer yet another perspective. Too alert to the need to communicate with their audience to draw consistently on Spenserian models, they nonetheless were freer than the prose historians to capitalize on the temporal qualities of language.

Staging History
Defending plays in Pierce Penniless his Supplication to the Devil (1592), Thomas Nashe echoes Puttenham’s justification for historical poetry. The subject matter of the plays is, he claims, “borrowed out of our English Chronicles, wherein our forefathers valiant acts (that haue line long buried in rustie brasse, and worm-eaten bookes) are reuied, and they themselues raised from the Graue of Obluiion, and brought to pleade their aged Honours in open presence.” 25 For Nashe, the value of drama lies in its power to bring the dead out of time-worn documents and back to life, to allow them to speak for themselves, and to represent their deeds in thrilling verisimilitude; it is an outcome that even the great heroes of English history would have relished:

24. The Honour of the Garter Displaied in a Poeme Gratulatorie (London, 1593), B3v. See also Thomas Storer, The Life and Death of Thomas Wolsey (London, 1599), which includes such archaisms as “hent,” “wight,” and “recks.”

25. Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Diuell (London, 1592), F3r. All citations are to this edition.
How would it have ioyed braue Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and haue his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least, (at seuerall times) who in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. (F3r)

The play selected here is apparently the first part of Henry VI (?Strange's Men, 1592), to which Nashe is thought to have contributed, and his comments may thus function in part as an advertisement of the author’s own prowess. However, they nonetheless testify to at least part of the effect that the early modern history play was thought to have on its audiences: its capacity to instill awe and emulation through the representation of historical figures. Nashe, like Brian Walsh in his recent study of the Elizabethan history play, stresses the corporeality of the encounter with the past, as the dry bones of the dead hero are represented by the apparently freshly bleeding body of the actor. For Walsh, the “present-tense origin” of the voices dramatized on a stage “is heightened in a way it cannot be in literary, historical or archaeological ventures,” through the presence and physicality of the actor. “Performance of the past,” he suggests, “is a dialogue with the dead that is produced through real-time, embodied acts of ventriloquism.”

It is, however, a dialogue in which the living usually have the linguistic upper hand. Nashe opposes the stage to the “worme-eaten bookes,” in which these heroes were formerly trapped, and there is at least a hint that part of the play’s success is to make Talbot seem both historical and contemporary. This late-medieval figure does not speak in fifteenth-century English, or even a pastiche thereof. Instead, the linguistic fabric of the 1590s history play is standard early modern English; indeed, in some cases dramatists strive to make their plays sound as contemporary as possible. Historical figures in these plays refer to Elizabethan songs, modes of fashion, and technology; they use Elizabethan words and even, on occasion, swear like Elizabethans. The desire to present history as contemporary could even inflect syntax and, thereby, the overall texture of a play. Fletcher and Shakespeare’s Henry VIII, or All is True (1613), is dominated—as Jonathan Hope has demonstrated—by incoming “you” forms in its singular second person pronouns, and it uses comparatively few of the recessive “thou” forms. Hope suggests that the language of the play might be “deliberately modern, aping contemporary court usage, just as the events portrayed are self-consciously related to the contemporary events of the Jacobean court.” Although the use of pronouns is unusual, Fletcher and Shakespeare’s general technique is not: the writers of history plays deploy a provocative mixture of historicist and presentist techniques, using anachronism to insist on the difficulty of fully separating past and present, and

27. Shakespeare, the Queen’s Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History (Cambridge, 2009), 21.
to foreground the correspondences that might be drawn between past events and present-day controversies.

The use of archaism in history plays is part of this temporally complex mix, and it appears in a number of different forms, including single words, phrases, metrical and syntactic forms, and the quotation of earlier texts. A deft example of the first of these techniques can be seen in the initial meeting of Queen Margaret and King Henry in the opening scene of 2 Henry VI, in which they exchange archaisms:

**QUEEN**

Great King of England, and my gracious lord,
The mutual conference that my mind hath had
By day, by night, waking and in my dreams,
In courtly company, or at my beads,
With you mine alderliefest sovereign,
Makes me the bolder to salute my King
With ruder terms, such as my wit affords
And overjoy of heart doth minister.

**KING**

Her sight did ravish, but her grace in speech,
Her words y-clad with wisdom's majesty,
Makes me from wondering fall to weeping joys,
Such is the fullness of my heart's content.29

Henry's use of “y-clad”—the archaic “y” prefix rare in Shakespeare's works but common in those of Spenser and his imitators—appears to pick up Margaret’s “alderliefest”; he follows her linguistic pattern as he falls under her sexual spell. Archaism is one sign of the momentary—and illusory—detachment of both characters from the political and military maelstrom of the *Henry VI* plays; they enact a self-consciously old-fashioned courtly romance. Margaret’s later actions suggest that she is playing out a role here, but Henry’s use of archaism reinforces the impression that he is a man unsuited to his own role, that of king.

Archaism in 2 *Henry VI* thus capitalizes on the capacity of individual words to adhere specific emotional and literary resonances to themselves through long usage. Other forms of archaism draw on the specific historical associations of old words. One of the most striking examples of this technique appears in Middleton’s *Hengist, King of Kent*, which includes an extraordinary moment when an early modern actor is required to speak in Old English, as Hengist first sets up, and then deploys, a watchword that will allow him to slaughter the unsuspecting British forces on Salisbury Plain. The phrase “Nemp your sexes,” a mangled version of the Old English *nimath eowra seaxes* (“take your daggers”), is attributed to Hengist in the accounts of John

Hardying, Holinshed, Speed, and others. Its presence within the play thus functions in some respects as an authenticating gesture—it tells the audience that this is Hengist, and this is how he acted. Simultaneously, however, it is strikingly out of place in the otherwise consistent language of Hengist, King of Kent, in which even the Saxons usually speak early modern English. It is therefore not just solely or simply a historicizing gesture but a powerful anachronism, one that calls attention to the construction of historical narrative, and to the foreignness of the Saxon invaders.

The use of archaism to authenticate and alienate simultaneously is also at work when the outmoded form that is imitated is syntactical or metrical. The archaic verse form of the Skeltonic—a series of irregular short lines, rhymed in couplets or in runs of three or more lines, and linked by various forms of repetition—appears in Munday's The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon. The Skeltonic is, appropriately enough, given to Munday's representation of the Tudor poet John Skelton, with whom it is most associated. This is, however, part of a deliberate muddling of chronologies in the play, in which the Robin Hood narrative—set in the reign of Richard I—is framed by scenes that locate the narrative as a play being performed for either Henry VII or VIII and apparently written by Skelton himself. Liz Oakley-Brown has written illuminatingly on the temporal confusions of the play; however, it is the specifically stylistic nature of these confusions. Skelton takes on the role of Friar Tuck in the Robin Hood narrative, and throughout the play both Skelton and Friar Tuck are prone to falling into Skelton's distinctive “ribble rabble rimes.” At the end of the induction, for instance, Skelton turns to the audience and instructs them,

Therefore I pray yee,  
Contentedly stay yee,  
And take no offending,  
But sit to the ending.  
Likewise I desire,  
Yea would not admire  
My rime so I shift.  
For this is my drift,  
So mought I well thriue,  
To make yee all blithe  
But if ye once frowne,  
Poore Skelton goes downe[.]  

33. The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntingdon, Afterward Called Robin Hood of Merrie Sherwodde (London, 1601), A3v–A4r.
Through the Skeltonic, the audience is constantly reminded that the Robin Hood story is a play-within-a-play, and a doubly fictional construct. The archaic form also assists in creating the impression that three time periods are functioning simultaneously: the early medieval period of the Robin Hood story; the early Tudor period of Skelton; and the late Elizabethan moment of the play’s performance by the Admiral’s Men at the Rose playhouse. At the same time, the use of the Skeltonic both upholds and disrupts the identity of the character to which it is attached. The form’s idiosyncrasy, and its strong association with this one author, allows it to authenticate the identity of “Skelton” within the fiction, and to remind spectators that “Skelton” is playing “Friar Tuck” when the Friar also uses the form. However, this authentication depends on the enabling fiction that the “real” Skelton could actually have spoken in Skeltonics spontaneously and habitually.

Imitation brings with it one set of temporal engagements; another is evoked by the quotation of archaic texts. Another late Elizabethan history play to which Munday contributed, *Sir Thomas More*, includes at its center the performance of a morality play, *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*, in which More eventually improvises the part of Good Counsel when one of the actors fails to appear. The morality play itself is constructed from quotations from at least three extant works—Thomas Ingelend’s *The Disobedient Child* (1558–69; printed ca. 1569), R. Wever’s *Lusty Juventus* (1547–53; printed in at least three editions after 1558), and *The Trial of Treasure* (?1560s; printed 1567)—together with bridging lines and passages written in a mock-morality style, with archaic vocabulary and syntax. Although it might look at a glance as if the writers are attempting to lend historical verisimilitude to their inset play, all of these works were written long after More’s death, and one, *Lusty Juventus*, is in fact virulently anti-Catholic. The inset play thus bears an uneasy relationship with the narrative of More’s life, and it perhaps implicitly reminds the audience both of More’s status as a Catholic martyr and his own complicity with religious persecution.

As this survey suggests, archaism can play a crucial role in the construction of pastness within early modern historical drama, working on both an intellectual and an affective level. While it might be used in some contexts to authenticate historical narrative—a function that it arguably fulfills in *Hengist, King of Kent*—it more often has a complex and ambiguous relationship to historical “truth.” As the examples of *The Downfall* or *Sir Thomas More* indicate, archaic linguistic or stylistic forms are often out of step with the periods that are ostensibly represented within the fiction, and they thus foreground the existence of multiple pasts, and multiple narratives about those pasts. In the final section of this essay, I build on this summary, turning to one of Shakespeare’s most ambivalent and theatrically vibrant uses of temporally aberrant language and exploring the complex ways in which he presents these forms of linguistic memory to his audience.

“My name is Pistol called”

Shakespeare’s 1 and 2 Henry IV are typical of the 1590s history play in their cheerful anachronism and their refusal to fully separate past and present. What is less typical, however, is the figure of Pistol, who appears noisily and abruptly in act 2, scene 4 of 2 Henry IV, and around whom a series of linguistic and stylistic archaisms cluster. Unlike Middleton’s Hengist or Munday’s Skelton, Pistol has no backstory to explain his aberration from surrounding norms of language, and his style is isolated, except for the odd occasions on which other characters imitate him. As Bridget Cusack notes, Pistol’s speech “constantly operates in direct contrast to surrounding colloquialism,” and his language brings the past onto the 1590s stage with a startling directness. However, Pistol’s archaism goes hand in hand with neologism and other presentist techniques. Whatever Shakespeare aims to achieve in the presentation of Pistol, it is not historical verisimilitude. Instead, he depends on his audience’s linguistic memory and their willingness to associate particular words with particular social and cultural contexts.

A diachronic effect is clear even in Pistol’s name. A Drawer announces him, even before he has appeared on stage, as “Ancient Pistol.” In addition to meaning “ensign,” ancient has obvious associations with the antique or old-fashioned. “Pistol,” on the other hand, is a recent coinage, first used in England perhaps as late as 1560. As A. R. Humphreys notes, Pistol “is well named, the early pistol being erratic, stupendously noisy, and less dangerous than it sounded.” The impression of newfangledness is heightened when Pistol is associated with another new word, again before he even steps on the stage. When the Drawer announces that Pistol has arrived, Doll Tearsheet denounces him as a “swaggering rascal” (2.4.56), and her term is picked up by Mistress Quickly, who repeats various forms of the noun and verb—swaggerers, swaggering, swagger—eight times in the forty or so lines before Pistol enters.

The repetition of the word “swagger” suggests that the term might have been unusual, and this impression is backed up by other texts of the 1590s. Robert Greene’s


39. The Second Part of King Henry IV, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (Cambridge, 1989), 2.4.55. All citations are to this edition.

40. The OED’s earliest citation, and the earliest that I have been able to find, is from Thomas Norton’s Orations of Arsanes Agaynst Philip the Trecherous Kyng of Macedone (London, ?1560): “this extreme crueltie should fray all persons from standing agaynst his wicked purposes hereafter, and as it were to shake his sworde and halters ouer all your heds & in example to hold the charged pistole to your bosomes” (N4v); it is perhaps notable that a 1546 proclamation regarding the use of handguns refers only to “hand gounnes, hagbushes, or other gunnes” (A Proclamation […] for the Restraynte of Shootyng in Handgunnes [London, 1546]).

41. The Second Part of King Henry IV, ed. A. R. Humphreys (London, 1977), 67–68. On the effect of this anachronism, see also Rackin, Stages, 139.
Defence of Coney Catching (1592) includes a reference to “the loue of the Poligamoi or bel-swaggers of the country,” and Nashe's Terroirs of the Night (1594) describes “a companye of lusty sailers (euerie one a sharker or a swaggerer at the least)” and advises those “that beare the name of souldiers, and liue baselie swaggering in euerie ale-house [...] seeke some newe trade, and leaue whoring and quarrelling.” For George Chapman in 1598 it was still an unusual word; in the preface to his Homeric translation Achilles' Shield he writes, defending his own linguistic choices, “Why alas will my young mayster the reader affect nothing common, and yet like nothing extraordinaire? Swaggering is a new worde amongst them, and rounde headed custome giues it priuledge with much imitation, being created as it were by a naturall Prosopopeia without etimologie or deriuation.” As the quotation from Terrors of the Night argues, the swaggerer is an Elizabethan roaring boy, an instantly recognizable 1590s stereotype; its use in Achilles' Shield also sets up an implicit contrast between the swaggerer and the book's Homeric heroes: the swaggerer is a mock-heroic figure, a debased modern parody of an archaic model of masculinity. It appears that Shakespeare's decision to invoke this stereotype found approval from audiences, and Pistol's characterization as a “swaggerer” is foregrounded on the title page of the 1600 quarto of 2 Henry IV, which is advertised as containing “the humours of sir John Falstaffe, and swaggering Pistoll.”

The swaggering Ancient Pistol is initially presented, therefore, as a linguistic, social, and temporal hodgepodge. And things become still more complicated when he finally makes his appearance. Pistol's lines initially consist of sexually charged and violent bluster, but in his first extended speech a different note is sounded. Exchanging insults with Doll, and refusing to leave, Pistol declares,

I'll see her damned first. To Pluto's damnèd lake—by this hand! To th'infernal deep,
With Erebus and tortures vile also.
Hold hook and line, say I, down, down, dogs, down faitors: Have we not Hiren here?

(2.4.123–27)

Repeating the word “damned” as “damnèd,” Pistol takes flight linguistically. As J. W. Lever points out, Shakespeare seems to have picked up some of the characteristics of

42. The Defence of Conny Catching. Or A Confutation of those Two Injurious Pamphlets Published by R. G. (London, 1592), D2r. The OED's earliest citations for “swagger” and its cognates (“swaggering,” “swaggerer,” etc.) mostly date from the early to mid-1590s.
43. The Terrors of the Night or, A Discourse of Apparitions (London, 1594), G2r, H1v.
44. Achilles Shield Translated as the Other Seven Bookes of Homer, out of his Eighteenth Booke of Iliades (London, 1598), B2r.
45. Pistol is also featured on the title page of the 1600 quarto of Henry V, which advertises “THE CRONICLE History of Henry the fift, With his battell fought at Agin Court in France. Togither with Auntaient Pistoll” and that of the 1602 quarto of The Merry Wives of Windsor, which boasts, among other pleasures, “the swaggering vaine of Auncient Pistoll, and Corporall Nym.”
Pistol’s speech—the debased “high” style, with its rhetorical questions, vaunting threats, and insistently bathetic classical reference—from the words given to a “Bragger,” “Seignior Cocodrill,” in John Eliot’s idiosyncratic French-language manual, Orthoepia Gallica (1593).46 For instance, the Bragger declares,

_Ho Caetzo great Diuel of hell, awake thy sleepie Cyclopes: Thou Vulcan who limpest with thy cosins Asteropes, Brontes, Steropes, Polyphemus and Pyracmon. I will set you a vorke. I guie my selfe to an hundred pipes of old Diuels, in case that if you will not fight, if I do not make you eate the two egges of Proserpina._47

Yet Pistol’s speeches are richer and more varied than those of the Bragger, encompassing classical reference, proverb (“Hold hook and line”), and linguistic archaism—faitors, meaning rogues, was apparently obscure by the 1560s, when Richard Grafton felt the need to gloss it in his Chronicle, although it lingered in literary usage.48 Lines 123–25 echo George Peele’s _The Battle of Alcazar_, and line 127, which puns on “Hiren” (“Irene”) and the “iron” of Pistol’s sword, is probably a quotation from a lost play, Peele’s _The Turkish Mahomet and Hiren the Fair Greek_, dating from around 1594.49 The Bragger’s disparaging reference to “Mahound God of Turkes and of Arabians” (r4r) has apparently fused with the bombast of contemporary drama. It is sometimes said that Pistol echoes the dramatic “hits” of the 1570s and 1580s,50 but Shakespeare’s target is actually more precise than this: the plays that he quotes and mimics are popular works written in the late 1580s and early 1590s that had a continued life on the late 1590s stage. As Russ McDonald puts it, “Pistol wants to sound like a Marlovian hero,” and he thus mimics not only Marlowe’s _Tamburlaine_ but also Marlowe’s imitators.51 Later in the same scene, the chivalric touches found in such lines as “Sweet knight, I kiss thy neaf” (2.4.150), and the use of Spenserian archaisms such as “welkin” and “wight,” are an ironic mismatch with the persona of the “swaggerer” that Pistol otherwise inhabits.

Like the writers of _Sir Thomas More_, Shakespeare is alert to the effects that can be created through dated syntax. In act 5, scene 3, Pistol comes to Falstaff with news of Prince Henry’s accession to the throne, telling him,

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47. Ortho-epia Gallica, Eliots Fruits for the French: Enterlaced with a Double new Invention, which Teacheth to Speake Truely, Speedily and Volubly the French-Tongue (London, 1593), r3v–t1r at s2r.
50. See, for instance, Thorne, “There is a History in All Men’s Lives,” 64.
Word order in early modern English was less fixed than it is in present-day English, but the inversions in this speech are still somewhat old-fashioned for the late 1590s, as is the heavy emphasis of the auxiliary “do” in line 77. These lines are also composed in a far more regular iambic pentameter than Pistol generally favors, suggesting that he has worked on this speech and is priding himself on its effects. The speech demonstrates once more Shakespeare’s finely calibrated combination of archaism and neologism; the form may be old-fashioned, but individual words are not: “helter-skelter” is first recorded only in 1592, in Nashe’s *Strange News*. Moreover, the links between Pistol’s archaism and Spenserian convention also suggest that archaism can be a marker of temporal similarity as much as difference: a man supposedly located in the early fifteenth century talks in an archaic fashion, but his archaism is as much tied to the late sixteenth century as is his neologism.

By the end of *2 Henry IV*, Shakespeare has settled on a linguistic profile for Pistol, one that creates temporal distance and proximity simultaneously. The archaism of Spenser is juxtaposed with the neologism of Greene and Nashe; classical reference jostles with popular culture and obscenity; and Marlovianism sits alongside romance vocabulary and deliberately stilted syntax. Pistol manages paradoxically to embody both the old and the new, his language as temporally unstable as his “Ancient Pistol” sobriquet. Moreover, the linguistic volatility of the character is an appropriate match for his violently unpredictable behavior. This almost excessively fictional addition to the historical narrative is both a comic buffoon and a potential threat.

Although Pistol is treated in a generally lighthearted fashion in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Shakespeare’s portrayal of the swaggering ancient gradually hardens in *Henry V*. In the early scenes Pistol is treated mainly as a comic figure, and his style is juxtaposed with other linguistic and dialectal variants. In particular, Pistol’s extravagant language is counterpoised by the monosyllables of Nym, a man with a limited vocabulary and an obsession with the word “humor,” a late 1590s buzzword following the theatrical success of Chapman’s *An Humorous Day’s Mirth* (Admiral’s Men, 1597) and Jonson’s *Every Man in his Humour* and *Every Man out of his Humour* (Chamberlain’s Men, 1598–99). The contrast between Pistol’s and Nym’s modes of speech is used for comic effect in the first scene of act 2 of *Henry V*, as the two men confront each other over Pistol’s marriage to Mistress Quickly and almost come to blows:


53. As Keir Elam writes, “humour” serves Nym “as a substitute for virtually any existing lexeme (noun, verb, modifier and all), or simply as a hopefully prestigious filler in place of nothing at all” (*Shakespeare’s Universe of Discourse: Language Games in the Comedies* [Cambridge, 1984], 274).
nym [...] If you grow foul with me, Pistol, I will scour you with my rapier, as I may, in fair terms. If you would walk off I would prick your guts a little in good terms, as I may, and that's the humour of it.
pistol O braggart vile, and damnèd furious wight, the grave doth gape and doting death is near. Therefore exhale!

[They draw their swords.]

bardolph Hear me, hear me what I say. [Draws his sword] He that strikes the first stroke, I'll run him up to the hilts, as I am a soldier.
pistol An oath of mickle might, and fury shall abate. Give me thy fist, thy forefoot to me give. Thy spirits are most tall.

nym I will cut thy throat one time or other in fair terms, that is the humour of it.54

Part of the comedy of this sequence lies in the stylistic contrast between the two characters: Pistol’s florid, syntactically complex speech is juxtaposed with Nym’s simpler sentence structures and his clear preference for monosyllables. As in 2 Henry IV, mock-chivalric or Spenserian touches in Pistol’s archaism, such as the phrases “damnèd furious wight” or “An oath of mickle might,” and the inverted syntax (“Give me thy fist, thy forefoot to me give”), are undermined by the speaker and by the context in which they are spoken.

As Henry V progresses, the voluble Ancient becomes not merely anti-heroic, but actively anti-heroic. Accordingly, the degree of ambivalence that surrounds his temporally unstable language increases. In act 3, in the midst of the wars in France, the Boy comments that Pistol “hath a killing tongue and a quiet sword, by the means whereof a breaks words and keeps whole weapons” (3.2.29–30). His language is both an alternative weapon and a debased imitation of one. By the end of act 4, scene 4, in the wake of Pistol’s capture of the French soldier, M. le Fer, the Boy’s opinion has hardened further:

I did never know so full a voice issue from so empty a heart. But the saying is true, the empty vessel makes the greatest sound. Bardolph and Nym had ten times more valour than this roaring devil i’th old play, that everyone may pare his nails with a wooden dagger, and they are both hanged, and so would this be if he durst steal anything adventurously. (4.4.53–58)

The Boy’s comparison of Pistol to the “roaring devil i’thold play” depends for its effect on the audience’s late sixteenth-century perspective: conflating the Devil and Vice, the Boy suggests that Pistol is as false and outmoded as the characters of a morality play, a mode that was only just coming into being in the time of Henry V’s early

54. King Henry V, ed. Andrew Gurr (Cambridge, 1992), 2.1.45–57. All quotations are from this edition unless otherwise noted.
fifteenth-century historical setting. The Boy becomes a mouthpiece for a critique of Pistol's blustering archaism that here is associated not with the chivalric, or even the mock-heroic, but with the artificial and overtly theatrical presentation of the Vice.

The treatment of Pistol as a contemporary “Vice” is intensified in the quarto version of *Henry V*, published in 1600, which includes an additional appearance for the character in the sequence numbered act 4, scene 6, by modern editors. While the Folio version has the initial stage direction “Alarum. Enter the King and his trayne, with Prisoners,” the quarto has “Enter the King and his Nobles, Pistoll.” At the end of the scene an alarum is sounded, and in the Folio Henry exclaims,

But hearke, what new alarum is this same?
The French have re-enforc’d their scatter’d men:
Then everey souldiour kill his Prisoners,
Giue the word through.                     
                             Exit                    
                             (z14v)

The quarto condenses the speech but adds a line for Pistol, who has been uncharacteristically silent up to this point:

What new alarum is this?
Bid everey souldier kill his prisoner.
                   Pist. Couple gorge.          
                             Exit omnes.  
                             (E4r)

This phrase is uttered by Pistol earlier in the play. In act 2, scene 1, he responds to Nym’s threat to cut his throat with “Couple a gorge, that is the word” (2.1.58), and in act 4, scene 4, he threatens to cut the throat of the unfortunate M. le Fer. The irony of the additional use of the phrase in the quarto version of act 4, scene 6, is that, in cutting his prisoner’s throat, Pistol will lose the two hundred crowns that he has negotiated for the ransom, leaving himself poorer than ever.

Gary Taylor’s suggestion that the prisoners are killed on stage, and that “it is Pistol, the high priest of literary grand guignol, who actually and before our eyes cuts a man’s throat”—presumably as he says the phrase *coupe la gorge*—has been disputed, and other editors have rejected the quarto’s line as implausible. Andrew Gurr, for example, argues that it “might be regarded as a nice comic twist, but it forgets the financial disaster that order became for Pistol through his loss of the ransom money.” However, the line does not have to be triumphant; if it is said in a doleful fashion, it

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55. The earliest morality plays to survive include *The Pride of Life* (late fourteenth century) and *The Castle of Perseverance* (1405–25).
57. *The Cronicle History of Henry the Fift* (London, 1600), E3v. All citations are to this edition.
actually underlines Pistol's loss rather than undermining it. Moreover, the presence of Pistol and his repetition of what is becoming his catchphrase emphasize the problematic nature of Henry's command, which Shakespeare treats with even greater ambivalence than Holinshed, his major source. Although Henry has disassociated himself from his erstwhile companions, the appearance of Pistol reconnects him with the unheroic tavern world of Pistol, the now-executed Bardolph and Nym, and the largely excised Falstaff, who appears in *Henry V* only in Mistress Quickly’s narration of his death. More specifically, it associates Pistol’s debased model of military masculinity, in which a veneer of chivalric archaism cannot conceal his cowardice and venality, with the king’s actions at a crucial point in the narrative.

From the first, Pistol’s use of neologism has indicated the artificiality of his archaic pose, but his linguistic imposture becomes more problematic in his later appearances. In *2 Henry IV* and, especially, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, his treatment is relatively mild, and his absurdity is enjoyed; in contrast, in *Henry V*, he is forced into a genuinely martial environment and the strains within his persona are laid bare. It is fitting, therefore, that Pistol’s final lines see him emphasizing the human costs and villainy of the tavern underworld in which he first appeared in *2 Henry IV*. Telling the audience that “my Doll is dead i’th’Spital of a malady of France, and there my rendezvous is quite cut off,” he vows to turn bawd and cutpurse, “And patches will I get unto these cudgelled scars, / And swear I got them in the Gallia wars” (5.1.72–73, 77–78). Pistol will continue to use words instead of real weapons, confirming the Boy’s critique of his empty roaring.

Pistol’s temporally unstable language fuels a critique of particular models of masculinity—in this case, not only that of the 1590s tavern “swaggerer” but also, through ironic inversion, those of characters including Henry V himself. Archaism in this play is not merely ornament but a crucial expression of the ways in which Shakespeare picks away at his historical narrative, suggesting both its own tensions and its potential application to contemporary debates. Like the famous reference to the Earl of Essex’s Irish campaign in the fifth Chorus of the Folio version of *Henry V* (5.0.29–32), Pistol’s presence helps the playhouse audience to read analogically, and to set past against present. If Shakespeare’s *Henry V* is to be read against Essex, or even against Elizabeth herself, Pistol suggests the complexities and tensions involved in such a reading.

**Conclusion**

As Pistol’s example shows, to “speak history” in the 1590s history play is not merely to revive the past but to reanimate it and to question it. As a form of embodied linguistic and cultural memory, archaism might help to connect old and new disputes—past and present military campaigns, for instance—and to delineate potential points of contact with different sections of the playhouse audience: those who have read *The Faerie Queene*; those who remember seeing a morality play in their youth; those who have heard the word “y-clad” in a ballad; or those who are aware that there is something old-fashioned about the phrase “damnèd furious wight.” Archaism may evoke particular
narratives about the past—be they literary or historical—but it may also evoke simply a feeling of the past, an awareness that things were done differently in earlier times, or an understanding that words may die, but they can also be revived. Because linguistic memory is a shared resource between English speakers of different social backgrounds, dramatists such as Shakespeare were able to use it consciously as a means of putting the past to work. Archaism is not, in these plays, the product of “back-looking curiosity,” as Camden terms it; instead, it is a crucial means through which early modern playgoers could encounter and experience social, cultural, and national memory.

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