SHAKESPEARE, b. 1709

On April 23, 1616, Shakespeare died. And nothing happened. His widow wept. His children grieved. But school was open the next day. Sure, folks in Stratford probably *noticed* – the death of the big shot in the big house who made a major fortune in a minor industry. But life went on in Stratford, and Shakespeare’s fellows soon returned to hoarding grain and arguing about enclosure.

Whatever little splash Shakespeare’s death made in Stratford it probably didn’t take *too* long for those mortal tidings to ripple around London’s theatre world. For if anything is trans-historically true it’s that actors love a bit of bad news. So Shakespeare’s death may have been a topic of morbid fascination or even mordant hilarity for actors to gossip over backstage at the Globe between hands of Ruff and Honor. You can ever hear, across the years, the jokes they might have made.

Heminges. So what do you think he died of?

Condell. Boredom, after writing *The Tempest*.

If you’ve ever been backstage during a show, you’ll know what I’m talking about. In the nervous, often demented humor of the theatrical greenroom, deaths and other final exits provide a large share of the punchlines. Think about the stuff actors say to their colleagues about the audience. “We’re knocking ‘em dead” or “We’re dying out there”. Both suggest that either the actors *or* the audience are going to get out alive, but not both. But then theatre is in love with loss, and so adores the idea of its own demise. When the fire curtain falls at a west end theatre, it is both a safety measure and a celebration, a precaution, obviously, again our immolation but a boast as well about the wrack we’ll all soon come to.

And yet, as far as we know – which isn’t very far – upon Shakespeare’s death the King’s servants did not observe a moment of silence before the afternoon show. There’s no record of heartfelt pre-show encomia, no *ad hoc* curtain-call eulogies, no retrospective season to honor the work of their former fellow. So while his fellow actors may have thrown some shade about his death, they didn’t immediately try and stir his ghost. (Though think about how badly Heminges and Condell felt when they found out Shakespeare had left them each a nice ring. Well, one of them must have sighed, I suppose we’ll have to do something nice for *him*, now….)

So following his death, Shakespeare's theatrical profile was entering a weird phase, a relatively brief but unique stretch between the death of the writer and the birth of the author, a theatrical purgatory of sorts between the decomposition of Shakespeare’s biological corpse and the re-composition of his bibliographical corpus. It wouldn’t be too terribly long, though, before his ghost would walk again and remind the younger generation just how the old folks did it. Shakespeare wrote a long essay on the subject, better known by the name of *Hamlet*.

In short, at the time of his death on 23 April 1616 Shakespeare was far from a celebrity. None of his fellow-poets chose to mourn his passing; no gatherings in his honor were held; no contemporary references to his death have survived. No slapdash biography hustled up for the ha’-penny press. Shakespeare was dead, and had every appearance of remaining so.

But then Shakespeare’s reputation began to illume across the seventeenth century, first as a flicker then as a flame. But I want to argue today that Shakespeare was really born, or born *again* in 1709, and not just to flatter a group who’ve dedicated themselves to a study of that century. And if, like Nicodemus, we’re skeptical about the phrase “born again” in this context, we might at least agree that in 1709 Shakespeare was re-born, not of water and the spirit, but by editors and anecdotes.

Which brings me to the year of my title, 1709, which is the year when Nicholas Rowe got together with Jacob Tonson to publish *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear* in six volumes. Kicking off *the* great century of Shakespearean editors and editions, in which, if nothing else, the editorial quibble was fully weaponized.

As you know, Rowe’s edition of Shakespeare was innovative in any number of ways.

* It was the first edition in octavo, following the four Folios of the seventeenth century
* It was the first to bear an editor’s name
* It was the first to attach a *Dramatis Personae* to each play
* It was the first to completely divide the plays into acts and scenes
* And it was the first edition to include illustrations, which were based on contemporary stage performances of the plays. Macbeth wears a three-cornered hat, Gertrude wears a late Stuart gown, etc.

But most importantly for my purposes, the edition contained the first formal biography of William Shakespeare, completed with the aid of research done in Stratford-upon-Avon by the actor Thomas Betterton. Because Nicholas Rowe had sent Betterton down to Stratford to visit Shakespeare’s old haunts, and stir a ghost or two.

And so, in these terms, Rowe was not just an editor, he was a resurrectionist. And once he had exhumed Shakespeare, he baptized him in anecdotes. Giving us Shakespeare of Charlecote, Shakespeare the truant student, Shakespeare the country rascal, who lit out for London with the law on his heels, thirsty for the immortality, or immorality, that London had to offer him.

The rebirth of Shakespeare comes with the birth of biography, and had Shakespeare known how much employment his death would occasion he might have lived a little longer, or died a little sooner, depending on whether we like our Shakespeare gentle or unruly. Choose your own adventure.

To compound an exaggeration with an irony, Shakespeare biography begins when the story of his life achieved escape velocity from fact. For Rowe launched the Shakespeare biography industry with a flurry of dubious anecdotes. At the time, Rowe modestly suggested that “the knowledge of an Author may sometimes conduce to the better understanding his Book” – rather than the other way around – and therefore allowed that his readers might be “fond…of discovering any little Personal Story” about the life of the author. Nicholas Rowe doesn’t have that much to answer for, but one thing might be that another Shakespeare biography has been written and published since the time I opened this talk. In fact, I’m currently writing a biography of Shakespeare, or I’m currently *not* writing a biography of Shakespeare since I’m here talking about writing a biography, which is what most writing consists of: which is to say, not writing.

I digress. The great Shakespearean, Margreta de Grazia, has recently written on the odd non-conformity between Shakespearean anecdotes and the documentary evidence for the conduct of his life. “Why is the Shakespeare of the anecdotes at such variance with the Shakespeare of the biographies?” she asks. She concludes that Shakespearean anecdotes emphasize his wild side – the deer poaching, the heavy drinking, the citizen fornicating – not as a form of life writing but as a kind of literary criticism, which is only fair since most literary criticism of Shakespeare is a form of life writing – sometimes even about Shakespeare. But for de Grazia, our sense of Shakespeare’s ungoverned pen – so fluid, so quick, so altogether unblotting – required and so produced a writer whose actions match his art. De Grazia’s thesis is therefore that anecdotes about Shakespeare’s life record “not the life Shakespeare lived between 1564 and 1616 but the impression his works made after his death.” Shakespearean anecdotes give us not the life he led but the life we need.

Ever since Rowe’s innovation, then, the curious condition of the Shakespeare biography is that it must allot as many pages to events that are demonstrably untrue as to those that demonstrably are. If not more. Certain events must be rehearsed, if only to be dismissed: The deer stealing incident; the William the Conqueror punchline; the aging queen who should like to see the fat knight in love. The biographer has to give these matters serious hearing, however much she would prefer to tuck in to weightier issues: Was Shakespeare a Catholic? What was his connection to the Essex circle? And why did he choose to wear that hilarious fright wig when he sat for Martin Droeushot?

The Shakespeare biographer’s dilemma is plain: they have a professional obligation to include incidents that would not pass the smell test with a junior varsity debate team. But of course if they *don’t* include them, they might seem not to know the one thing that “everybody knows” about Shakespeare — that he got caught, for instance, poaching Thomas Lucy’s deer.

As I mentioned, the source of many of Rowe’s anecdotes was his buddy Thomas Betterton, dispatched to Stratford to harvest stories about Shakespeare’s life. And this is where the story gets even weirder, since in gathering these stories about Shakespeare, Betterton seems to have somewhat become him. As Joseph Roach has argued, Betterton was always playing a ghost, most obviously that of Shakespeare since Betterton became the “living incarnation of Shakespearean tradition” — supported by the venerable anecdote that Shakespeare had himself played the Ghost in *Hamlet*. Descended of Shakespeare, Betterton performed for half a century through the reigns of four monarchs, trailing Shakespeare’s memory like a train behind him. If so, I would argue that nowhere does this receive a fuller expression than in Act 1, scene 5 of *Hamlet*, where the consummate actor comes face to face with his maker. Hamlet meet Hamlet, or Ham meets Ham-fist.

So the encounter between Hamlet and his father becomes an allegory of authorship, which is to say a source of constant embarrassment for actors, who, after all, took all that trouble to memorize their lines to make you forget who wrote them. In sum, Act 1, scene 5 of *Hamlet* is not a scene, but a séance, a form of “Shakespeareatualism” in the terms of Jeffrey Kahan, in the book of the same name. And, of course, it produces the same split between those who find such things plausible and those who find them risible. In the theatre there’s always such a fine line between the ludic and the ludicrous.

But let’s take a look at one of Rowe’s spurious anecdotes. How do we know that Shakespeare played the Ghost in *Hamlet*? Rowe tells us so in the 1709 biography, where he claims that “the top of [Shakespeare’s] performance was the Ghost in his own *Hamlet*.” There’s something haunting about the formulation here – Shakespeare playing the Ghost “in his own *Hamlet*” – the shadow of the author inhabiting his own work, even long after his own death.

Of course this biographical “fact” of Shakespeare’s performance may have nothing to do with his acting career and every bit to do with Betterton’s. In 1679 at Dorset Garden Theatre, Thomas Betterton, identifying himself as “Representing the Ghost of Shakespeare” came on stage to deliver the prologue to Dryden’s version of *Troilus and Cressida*. Given that Betterton was the chief source of documentary material for Rowe’s biography, was Nicholas Rowe unwittingly writing a biography of Thomas Betterton as much as William Shakespeare?

To compound the confusion, Nicholas Rowe wrote something else in 1709, not just the biography of Shakespeare but a short poem to honor Betterton at a benefit that same year. Rowe wrote, addressing the audience:

Had you withheld your favors on this night

Old Shakespeare’s Ghost had risen to do him right.

With indignation had you seen him frown

Upon a worthless, witless, tasteless Town;

Grieved and repining you had heard him say,

Why are the Muses’ labors cast away?

Why did I only write what only he could play?

This little rhyme, written to honor Thomas Betterton, collapses into one the specter of the author with the specter of the actor, Shakespeare’s ghost arises to administrate the years between his death and his rebirth at the outset of the 18th century, with Thomas Betterton as his avatar.

The idea that Shakespeare might come from the grave to complain or protest that “only he” – only Betterton – could play what he’d written turns Shakespeare into a weird sort of ghost writer and therefore the encounters between young and old Hamlet as an agonistic encounter between an acolyte actor and a surrogate author.

And so let me pivot here and turn to my main theme for the rest of this talk, the way that Betterton became a specter of Shakespeare, a kind of ghost-actor inhabited by the spirit of Shakespeare, a haunting consecrated in the ghostly encounters of Betterton’s and then Garrick’s *Hamlet*. (Of course, in the theatre, it’s hard to tell the difference between consecration and desecration. In other words, the theatre has a hard time keeping a straight face when it looks too closely at itself. And when Hamlet stares at his father’s ghost or at the skull of Yorick, the theatre often collapses in giggles, embarrassed by these all-too-serious encounters with its own history. Anecdotes are a kind of theatrical blush when the theatre starts to take itself too seriously. Later today, I and my colleagues will dilate further on this when we look at the *Hamlet* section in *Tom Jones*, a spectacular apotheosis of the period’s anecdotal obsession with Shakespeare.)

And there are almost as many theatrical anecdotes about *Hamlet* as there are theories about the play’s first quarto – and there a lot of theories about the play’s first quarto. These anecdotes nearly all circulate around *Hamlet*’s ghost and the play’s central graveyard scenes. These anecdotes all worry over a theatrical paradox, how to stage a thing that is nothing. The theatre often shies when it has to embody the disembodied, and *Hamlet*’s graveyards are predictably full of anecdotes.

As noted, Thomas Betterton acted like he was already dead, and his fame produced dozens of phantom anecdotes, including, for instance, a story of him down in the provinces, passing himself off as an amateur to a company of visiting players. This is of course a version of the old disguised-king-among-the-commoners gag or, better, of Jesus’ disciples not recognizing him after the resurrection, which is fair enough since he’d been in pretty bad shape the last time they saw him.

Back to Betterton. According to the anecdote, he proposed to the manager that he play the Ghost in *Hamlet*. The offer is accepted and Betterton stumbles through rehearsal. The word goes out to an expectant audience that, “the amateur was a sorry stick…and most…were prepared for an exhibition of awkwardness when the ‘borrowed majesty of Denmark’ received his cue.” On the night in question, Betterton appears in all his terror and in all his talent: “‘Mark me,’ said the spectre, in deep, sepulchral tones, … fixing a dreadful eye upon the astonished manager, ‘mark me.’ ‘I do,’ said Hamlet, in tremulous tones, looking as if he might distill to jelly with the act of fear. ‘By Heaven I do, and I shall never forget you.’” Betterton cements the memory of his own performance by reminding other usurpers to “mark” him. Given that Betterton was most famous as *young* Hamlet, he solves the problem of how to produce the realistic ghost of Old Hamlet, which is that young Hamlet needs to play him. This is a natural double that the play simultaneously asks for but makes impossible (unless you’re Jonathan Pryce, who….)

As I noted, *Hamlet*’s anecdotal history in the eighteenth century busies itself with two scenes in particular, the initial ghostly encounter between the Hamlets, and the later scene of Yorick’s skull when Hamlet exercises his curiously forensic interest in the afterlife. I’ve called these scenes a source of embarrassment, and one solution to the indecorous sight of a Danish prince juggling skulls was to cut it altogether. On October 4, 1777, the *London Times* ran a probably facetious letter to the managers of Drury Lane protesting the playing of *Hamlet’*s gravest scenes:

GENTLEMEN, I Much approve your discarding from the Play of HAMLET that hasty, vulgar, and illiberal Scene of the Grave Diggers, fit only to make the Wretches in the Galleries laugh. I protest I was ready to puke when I saw the Men handle the Skulls! Let the Ghost and the Skulls go to the Devil together, they are not fit to come before a polite Audience

One solution to the skull scene was to cut it, then, bury it. But such things tend to rise again. Just six years later, on September 22, 1783, *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* covered the repair of Drury Lane and reported the discovery of “A human scull in the earth under the stage…. An old scene shifter unravelled the mystery, by declaring it was no other than Yorick’s scull used in Hamlet, and that he remembered it being lost many years since in Mr. Garrick’s time.”So even when the scene is cut, the skull is always just beneath the stage. That’s why it’s called a “remain.”

Of course, the most plausible representation of a Ghost would be one that does not appear at all. The growing embarrassment that the Ghost caused enlightened stage-craft in the eighteenth century reached its nadir in 1760 with the French premiere of *Hamlet* in a neo-classical version, which cut the Ghost altogether. Instead, Hamlet carried around his father’s cremated remains in an urn. **[joke here]**

However sarcastic, the correspondent to the *London Times* locates the technical challenges of casting the ghost and Yorick. Both scenes challenge the theatre to represent the dead. But if Yorick’s skull is all-too-plausibly dead — is all too plausibly *not acting* — Hamlet’s ghost inverts the problem. The actor playing the ghost is too plausibly alive. The scene has therefore produced a cluster of stories that focus on the Ghost’s intrusive body – a tradition that reaches something of an apotheosis in *Tom Jones*. A nineteenth-century correspondent summarizes the tradition, telling us that,“Amusing anecdotes are told of the part of the Ghost in *Hamlet* being played by a Mr. Stuart, of Liverpool, with his arm in a sling; of another performer who neglected to remove his spectacles before going upon the stage; … and more recently of an actor in New York, with loud creaking boots.” And, of course, an anecdote connected with Charles Kean in which the ghost was too drunk to walk, an all too spirited spit. The creaking boots of the New York ghost might seem appropriate, since Hamlet claims that ghosts squeak and gibber, or at least Roman ones do.

But a lead-footed ghost echoes the anecdotes’ most frequent complaint. To offer one more paradox, it is often the ghost’s weight that diminishes his gravity, as related in the following, late eighteenth-century anecdote:

Mr. Banks, for many years co-lessee of the Manchester Theatre, was a remarkably large, fat man…. Mr. Banks always played the Ghost in *Hamlet*: once on a time, while acting the part on the stage of the Manchester Theatre, his great bulk gave rise to a most laughable incident. The Ghost, it will be remembered by our theatrical readers, used to vanish from some of the scenes, through a trap-door on the stage. Well, on one occasion, Mr. Banks had taken his station on the spot. The bolt was withdrawn, and slowly descended the Ghost, truncheon in hand. The legs disappeared in due course; but whether owing to the increase of his own bulk, or to some alteration in the size of the aperture, the moment the huge, round body touched the edge of the stage, the process of sinking suddenly ceased. The Ghost stuck fast in the middle. No contrivance, no squeezing, no exertion on the part of Mr. Banks could force his Falstaffian body down through the trap-hole. The auditory were convulsed with laughter; even the ghost himself joined in the laughter, and quietly submitted to be lifted out of the hole by the stage attendants.

Here is a ghost fat with life. Like Falstaff, his body is, as in Prince Hal’s nasty eulogy, too wide for the grave. And here, too, is the Ghost of Old Hamlet who doesn’t go down easy. An author determined to have the last word. Caught in between, the actor punctures the membrane between offstage and on and becomes a specter of laughter. After all, anecdotes often loiter in the alleys between onstage and off. Ghosts make their home in the in-between as well, and so ghosts and anecdotes run into one another there. Most stages have at least one trap, and they usually end up catching anecdotes.

The weight of actors — both men and women — has long been a point of cruel emphasis in the theatre. A dog-eared joke advises the actor playing Lear that a crucial point is, as John Gielgud once put him, “to ‘get a small Cordelia.’”

Furthermore, the “pound of flesh” in *Merchant of Venice* has also frequently provided an irresistible gagwith which to tweak a portly Shylock. There is even a minor sub-genre of anecdotes that report on actors taking seriously Gertrude’s comment that Hamlet is “fat and scant of breath.” But a huge body of anecdotes has swelled around *Hamlet*’s ghost over the years. History is full of ghosts judged to have, as a reviewer of a Drury Lane performance put in 1813, “nothing ethereal in it, but was a mass of most gross and palpable mortality.” In a story about Larry O’Rourke’s Hamlet debut at the Cork Theatre we learn of “the beefy, provincial ghost, with a sepulchral voice, and the usual difficulty of disappearing as a ghost ought.” A piece of doggerel from 1889 criticizes the ghost on a number of fronts, but signals him out for being, “A shade too obese for my choice.”The history of *Hamlet* is not just riddled with skulls, it is fat with phantoms.

In some respects, a corpulent ghost fulfills Hamlet’s notion that a “fat King” and a “lean beggar” enjoy similar afterlives. But anecdotes administrate difference, and here the difference is between the body of the actor and of a disembodied character.

One further implausibility, for instance, is that the Ghost appears in armor, which raises impertinent questions about why a ghost needs armor in the first place. A ghost with armor is like a fish with a snorkel. Nevertheless, in a number of instances the ghost’s armor becomes distracting and sometimes nearly fatal. In 1781 we learn “that the *glimpses of the moon*, had such a *visible* effect, on the *compleat steel* of Denmark’s Ghostly King, so to tinge the edging of the armour with a perfect *yellow* hue.—To speak more plain…instead of the appearance of steel armour, the coat of mail … looked like black leather with gingerbread binding.” There’s such a fine line between a “visible effect” and a risible one, and the ghost of Hamlet haunts that perilous terrain. There are worse things, of course, than wearing armor laced with gingerbread, including being baked alive. As we learn in another anecdote about David Garrick:

When Garrick performed in Goodman’s-fields, the stage was what might be called a rapid descent to the pit, and was very difficult to walk on. As fate would have it, it was the practice of all the ghosts to appear in real armour. The dress for this most august personage had, one night, in honour of Garrick’s Hamlet, been borrowed from the Tower, and was somewhat stiff. The moment the King of Denmark … made his appearance at the stage door, unable to keep his balance, he rolled down to the lamps, where he lay exposed to fires somewhat too lasting, until a wag in the pit drew the attention of the other performers to the pitiable object by crying out, “The *ghost* will be burned!”

It was the fate of Old Hamlet to burn out his days in pitiless fire, but verisimilitude needs to end at the edge of the stage.

Both the cause and the effect of these haunting anecdotes is that for much of *Hamlet*’s performance history the part of the supernatural was left to a supernumerary, always an occasion for theatrical hilarity. An anecdote from *Everybody’s Magazine* from the 19th c. tells of, “a barnstorming company in the West in the old days that made a try at Shakespeare. Considerable complaint was heard relative to the efforts of the man who essayed to do the Ghost in ‘Hamlet.’ One day a dramatic man on a local paper said to the leading man: ‘That fellow who plays the Ghost does not suggest the supernatural.’ ‘I should say not,’ assented the leading man with alacrity, ‘but he does suggest the natural super.’” The pun on “super” points to the superfluity of old Hamlet’s part, the superfluity of an author after the curtain raises. He is a leftover, a fleeting memory of the old regime, the author haunting the wings and trying to tell the actors what to do. And since he’s something extra, he’s best left to the extras.

The routine ineptitude of these super-failures is the frequent butt of theatrical jokes, as professionalism collides with naiveté. One evident solution to an implausible ghost is simply to kill off the actor — they’re just extras after all. I quote from *The Spectator*: “A player performing the Ghost in ‘Hamlet’ very badly, was hissed; after bearing it a good while he put the audience in good humor by stepping forward and saying, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I am extremely sorry that my humble endeavors to please are unsuccessful; but if you are not satisfied, I must give up the ghost.” This gag is obviously reverse-engineered from the punch line, but it echoes across theatre history, over and over again. Since a ghost is a name without a body, the best bet is always to cast a nobody. The suffering super explains the player’s dilemma: the part demands of an actor that he disappear into the role.

It is far less clear from *Hamlet*’s history just what might make a realistic ghost, which is of course one cause for all the anecdotes. In 1916, the *Courier-Journal* — which apparently knows something that we don’t — celebrated a ghost for his realism, praising “W.L. Thorne,… whose ghost in ‘Hamlet’ was realistic, because of a well-modulated voice….” Barton Booth took the precaution of covering his feet in felt, which “made no noise in walking on the stage,” William Cooke recalled, “which strongly corresponded with the ideas we have of an incorporeal being.” The *Pall Mall Gazetter* [when?] explains that the defining feature of a good ghost is, well, “ghostliness”. Discussing Edwin Booth’s Hamlet in 1880, the critic complained that, “the Ghost of Mr. Ryder was wanting in the all-essential quality of ghostliness.”The standard of realism is impossibly tautological: ghosts should be ghostly. We know one when we see one, although we’ve never seen one.

In these terms, *Hamlet* is almost invariably the occasion to expiate upon the difference between a credible performance and a credulous audience. And quite possibly because Hamlet himself meditates over the differences between seems and is, theatrical anecdotes pick up the cue. A newspaper in the 1780s recounts the:

“Inconveniences of the Stage in Garrick’s Time…. The first time Holland acted Hamlet, it was for his own benefit…. On seeing the Ghost he was much frightened, and felt the sensation and terror usual on the occasion, and his hat flew *a-la-mode* off his head. An inoffensive woman in a red cloak, hearing Hamlet complain the air bit shrewdly, and was very cold, with infinite composure crossed the stage, took up his hat, and with the greatest care placed it fast on Hamlet’s head, who on the occasion was as much alarmed in *reality*, as he had just then been feigning. But the audience burst out into such incessant peals of laughter, that the Ghost moved off without any ceremony; and Hamlet, scorning to be outdone in courtesy, immediately followed, with roars of applause.”

This same sort of thing happened once in the case of a certain Marcellus on the eighteenth century stage. A critic reports, “Hamlet demands of Horatio concerning the ghost of ‘buried Denmark,’ ’Stayed it long?’ Horatio answers, ‘While one with moderate haste might tell a hundred.’ Marcellus should add, ‘Longer, longer.’ But the Marcellus of *this* special occasion was mute. ‘Longer, longer,’ whispered the prompter. Then out spoke Marcellus, to the consternation of his associates, ‘Well say two hundred!’”

According to anecdotal history, then, the Ghost leads *Hamlet* in two different directions — towards the hilarious, or towards the terrifying, for the most successful ghosts disrupt the play by becoming, if anything, *too* realistic. Which brings us back to Betterton, who was famously effective at responding to his father’s ghost by nearly becoming one himself, according to the author of the “Lick at the Laureat,” an invective against Colley Cibber, published in 1730:

“I have lately been told by a gentleman, who has seen Betterton perform *Hamlet*, that he observed his countenance, which was naturally ruddy and sanguine, in the scene of the third act where his father’s ghost appears, through the violent and sudden emotion of amazement and horror, turn instantly, on the sight of his father’s spirit, as pale as his neckcloth; then his whole body seemed to be affected with a tremor inexpressible; so that, had his father’s ghost actually risen before him, he could not have been seized with more real agonies. And this was so strongly felt by the audience, that the blood seemed to shudder in their veins likewise; and they, in some measure, partook of the astonishment and horror with which they saw this excellent actor affected.”

What renders the Ghost so impressive here is that he nearly exsanguinates his son — not to mention the audience. A further wrinkle on the anecdote appears in a later version, which adds a telling detail. “The first time [Barton] Booth attempted the Ghost, when Betterton acted Hamlet, that actor’s look at him struck him with such horror, that he became disconcerted to such a degree, that he could not speak his part.” Old Hamlet should be the only actor in the play completely immune to stage fright, but here he’s struck dumb by his son, the moral of which is that if the actor plays Hamlet well enough he can leave the actor speechless.

One take-away from this tale is that Thomas Betterton was such a good actor that he could ably play the ghost even when he was playing Hamlet.

There is, incidentally, a far more recent version of this story from 1989. Daniel Day-Lewis’s celebrated Hamlet one night thought that, “his father’s apparition had actually risen before him,” though it is not clear if Day-Lewis is just staying in character when he says so. The stage manager’s report reads,

Thursday 5 September “On the Ghost’s exit in Act 1, Scene 5, Mr Day-Lewis left the stage and told me that he could not continue the performance. An announcement was made and the audience invited to take an extra interval. The announcement only specified technical problems. After 32 minutes the performance resumed with Mr Northam as Hamlet. Mr Bedford played Osric and Mr Nicholas a Switzer. Mr Northam coped brilliantly (not an exaggeration) and received an outstanding reception from the audience.

Day-Lewis could literally not go on, and he never did, retiring from the production after that night. Day-Lewis more recently recanted. In 2012 he clarified that “I don’t remember seeing any ghosts of my father on that dreadful night!” It is not entirely clear what he saw that night, or even if he’s simply forgotten to remember. I’d be tempted to ask, did the Ghost happen to have a partial goatee and suffer from male patterned baldness? In any event, Day-Lewis hasn’t played Hamlet since.

*Hamlet* without a ghost is, perhaps, inconceivable, but a *Hamlet* with too many, raises the specter of raising too many specters. As one final ghost story from the Haymarket Theatre suggests. Ultimately, the anecdote argues, there are far more dead kings than live ones, more dead jesters than just Yorick, and that the dead will always outnumber the living. Moreover, they’re gaining on us. At the same time, the following anecdote brilliantly solves the dilemma of a realistic ghost. The most realistic ghost is one that doesn’t show. (Pour yourself a drink, this is a longish one.)

A GHOST STORY.—At the Haymarket Theatre on Thursday the play was *Hamlet*. The audience assembled to witness the tragedy in respectable numbers and due solemnity. The hour of seven arrived—and the curtain was ready to rise; but the ghost, Mr. Hughes, was by no means like the curtain. The call-boy called but the obstinate spirit refused to obey. No wonder; the boy was on the stage, and the “poor Ghost” was solacing himself with the comforts of domestic peace…. There is historical authority for playing *Hamlet* with the part of Hamlet omitted, but *Hamlet* without the Ghost was never heard of. Every man who had ever played a Ghost was sent for. Mr. Wallack arrived first, resolved to address himself boldly to the difficulty, and set about dressing himself in complete steel, with the full intent to *read* the part. Someone who was less courageous suggested that as the Ghost appeared “in the dead waste and middle of the night,” he could not see to read. So a candle was resolved upon, and the Ghost had by these means been duly laid—but the messages to the ghostly regions now began to produce their effects. Hansom cabs crowded to the stage door, each depositing its ghostly contents. There was a very deluge of Ghosts of all sizes—thick, fat, short, and tall, among whom was Mr. Stuart, and finally came the delinquent himself, Mr. Hughes, whose absence had caused this impromptu entertainment. The tragedy was at last played with great applause, Mr. and Mrs. Kean and Miss L. Addison being called on to receive marks of hearty and well-merited approbation. But the wicked Ghost had gone to his place, and “would not come, though they did call for him;” he had had enough of it, and retired to the “Shades.”

The anecdote articulates the labor surplus of theatrical work — just as there are always more dead than living, there are always more actors out of work than on the stage. For every Ghost who chooses to walk out, there are a thousand who’ll walk on.

*Hamlet* offers one final entry into its morbid triptych of multiple ghosts and manifold skulls, which is the corpse of Ophelia, which poses a final challenge to a play fascinated with decomposition.

The well-ordered “property” boy at Booth’s Theater was seriously disconcerted on the first night of “Hamlet” upon discovering that Miss DeBar, who was cast for “Ophelia,” had determined to dress with a flaxen wig, an innovation wholly unexpected …. “Here’s a precious go!” said [the property boy], there’s “Ophelia” gone and dressed herself up a blonde while we’ve been more’n a month faking up her dummy with black hair…(The “dummy” served in the grave yard scene, be it understood).— “But it can’t be helped now. It’s too late. If anybody in front wants to know how it was the dummy’s hair turned, we’ll have to tell ‘em that ‘*Ophelia’s dyed* according to Shakspere, and so she has!”

The terrible pun echoes a play full of them. Perhaps that’s fitting, since *Hamlet* is an extended pun about a star who can’t act.

[PAUSE]

Ophelia’s grave is Hamlet’s trap and returns us to the threshold that all the skulls, ghosts, and dummies have to pass through. One of the reasons that theatre can’t shut its trap about these scenes is that, technically speaking, the play will not let it. An amateur theatre history reported in 1800 that,

The principal trap in almost all theatres is known as the grave trap. This is one of the conventionalism of the English stage, and is a testimony also to the enduring influence of Shakespeare. It is well understood that at some time or another the play of “Hamlet” will be performed in every theatre, and *Ophelia’s* grave must therefore be dug in every stage —hence the grave trap. It may be that it is not always placed in the right position to suit the ideas of each new representative of the Royal Dane, and it has happened that it has been found too short for the reception of poor *Ophelia’s* coffin; but it is never omitted in the construction of a stage.

Shakespeare’s enduring influence left a hole in every English stage, one that every aspiring actor ultimately has to pass through, or fall into. Sometimes the trap is too short, and sometimes the Ghost is too fat, and so when it comes to *Hamlet*, the grave trap often becomes a booby one.

[PAUSE]

*Hamlet* is full of unquiet graves — Hamlet’s lover, Hamlet’s father, Hamlet’s clown, Hamlet’s. Anecdotes gather at the tomb of the unknown actor to audition their embarrassment before a demanding authors. But the anecdotes have also a more serious intent. They gather not just to mock death or allay the shame of mock-death but to protest. And what they seem intent on protesting is the real meaning of *Hamlet*. The real meaning of *Hamlet* is that it ends.

As does this talk, eventually. I’ll close by pointing saying that there are just as many, if not more, anecdotes about skulls in Hamlet as there are about ghosts. And, as before, the administrate the *distinction* between the real and its resemblance, which eludes representation. For instance, WhenDavid Tennant played Hamlet at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2008, there was a brief kerfuffle over the revelation that he'd been using a real skull in the Yorick scene, that of a Polish pianist named Andre Tchaikovsky who bequeathed his skull to the RSC in 1982. Other actors, like Mark Rylance, had rehearsed with the skull before, but Tennant was the first reported to use a real live skull – or a real dead one – before a paying public.

Once the news broke, the real skull was replaced with a fake one when the show was transferred to London, although the show’s director, Gregory Doran, subsequently, and mischievously, shaded the question further by revealing after the fact that they never *had* replaced the real with a fake but were merely trying to quiet the chatter about it. In the *Guardian*, Jonathan Bate called the incident a "silly sideshow to a great theatrical event," but given the anecdote’s persistence, its tenacious grip on our attentions, I think this bit of theatrical chatter is more than a sideshow. In fact, I think it’s the main event.

Now there's a long history of actors using real skulls in performance, which I’ve dated back to 1750. But more to the point, there’s a ripe history of theatrical anecdotalism about actors using or claiming to use real skulls in performance — even or especially when they aren’t. These stories are always about *Hamlet*, which probably doesn’t surprise you but it is worth pointing out that no one ever bequeaths a skull so that it might be used in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. It's always *Hamlet* thatmakesus lose our heads.

And that is in part due to the fact that the pose of Hamlet, skull in hand, had become a talisman for theatrical eschatology as early as 1610. The durability and power of that tableau — Hamlet, skull in hand — taunts us with an uncomfortable truth.Which is that all skulls look alike. After all, you can never ever really know just whose skull you’re holding; the only thing you may be sure of is just whose skull it isn't, which is your own. The scene confronts us then with a terrible truth, which is that, both physically and metaphysically, you couldn't pick your own skull out of a line up. We imagine that we are actors, but in the end, we all turn into props.

And that goes for Shakespeare as well. I opened by talking about Shakespeare rising from the grave in 1709, shrouded in anecdotes. In the present context, then, it’s worth mentioning that Shakespeare had his skull dug up as well – at least according to a Victorian anecdote. The skull may or may not have been Shakespeare’s but, if it was, according to at least one disappointed grave robber, it was “smaller than I expected” since it did not look like his effigy who looks down on Shakespeare’s tomb from the walls of Trinity Church. The body snatcher is disappointed to learn that Shakespeare doesn’t look like the original, which in this case is a copy. The failure of a poet to measure up to his effigy is just one more reason why it’s best to let them lie.

Apparently the tomb-raiders started to dig up the wrong grave at first, because “they were illiterate and could not read the name on the tombstone.” At this point, the anecdote almost eats itself, since the only reason you’d want to open Shakespeare’s tomb is because of what’s written there. Incidentally, you may find a group of illiterate grave robbers digging in the wrong place for Shakespeare’s head to be a highly suggestive image of the general state of Shakespearean scholarship. But I certainly don’t.

Why would anyone want to handle Shakespeare’s skull? Would it tell us anything new? That depends a great deal on whether you’re a Shakespearean or an epidemiologist. One would search for signs of life, the other the cause of death. In either case, there is not much weirder than digging up a writer’s skull and expecting him to say something original. Ultimately, the story of Shakespeare’s stolen head resolves into ambiguity. The skull was stolen – of that the anecdote is sure – but it is not clear whether it was ever returned. I think the upshot here is that if we were to open Shakespeare’s tomb, we might roll back the stones to find he isn’t there. But then since Shakespeare, anecdotally at least, was born on the day he died, every day is Easter in the Shakespeare industry.

But the real reason that Shakespeare isn’t there is that he’s busy playing the Ghost of *Hamlet* in a regional production in Adelaide, in a student production at Bard, on the stage at the Blackfriars Playhouse, or immediately underneath it. His is ghost is there to key an eye on all the actors trying to get on with *Hamlet* without him.

It took roughly 100 years for history to work this out, between a quiet Stratford death in 1616 and loud, or, at least, squeaky return in 1709. Rowe’s great accomplishment, then, was that at the top of the eighteenth century he managed to turn Shakespeare into a ghost of his former self.