

CODA: A PHILOLOGY OF TOUCH

Shakespeare's plays touch their audience – and they do so at a distance. In the preceding chapters, we have encountered many instances of this distance. All took their start from theatre's basic conditions: with the separation of stage and audience, a boundary between the fictional world of the characters and the real world of the theatre 'assembly'. Over the course of this study, we have reconstructed how Shakespeare plays with this boundary, his doubling it onstage in play-within-a-play scenes which expose its characteristics. The onstage theatre chimes with the experience of attending a play, one that we all share. This boundary does not hermetically seal off what it separates. Horatio and Hamlet show unmistakable, bodily signs (their paleness, their trembling) of having been 'touched' – although they have encountered a ghost (which everyone knows cannot be touched). The same holds true for Troilus when he observes Cressida and Diomedes flirting with each other. He watches from a distance; what he sees and hears is not addressed to him, and yet it causes him great suffering.

We might therefore be tempted to call theatre's boundary 'porous' or even 'permeable'. However, things are more complicated: emotions do not simply travel from stage to audience, transgressing the boundary that separates the two.

Affects are generated through the contact between the play and its recipients. The difference between permeating the boundary and establishing contact appears minimal, but it is decisive. Unlike transgressing an obstacle, establishing contact does not remove the boundary. A certain distance, though perhaps minimal, remains. This distance, which contains the tension between the movements of approximation and a final degree of repulsion, is the defining characteristic of touch. Touch establishes the encounter of at least two, bringing the partners of touch into a productive nearness. However, they do not merge into one, but remain separate. Hamlet does not become a ghost, or the ghost a living human. Troilus does not leave his hideout, nor does he (immediately) go for Diomedes' throat. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that nothing happens.

What looks less radical than an act of transgression has its own power. The relationship that touch brings forward is unique. Whereas transgression implies a one-directional movement of a certain active entity which breaks into and subverts a regime thought to be static and passive, touch does not know of a passive or an active part. It is characterised by an ineluctable mutuality. Touching and being touched cannot be distinguished; they take place at the same time. As a consequence, all the partners involved in a touching encounter are affected, are changed by their entering into touch. Touch therefore embraces anarchic qualities. It suspends social hierarchies and imbalances of power because it drags everyone and everything that participates in a touching encounter into a process of becoming, irrespective of their status or authority.

As we have seen, on the level of plot, touch is associated with femininity or outsider status. Beatrice and Cressida may be the epitome of characters versed in touch. However, a particular capacity for touch (culturally associated with femininity in the early modern period) is not tied to gender.

Hamlet, Richard, Benedick, Hector – they all operate (also) in the ‘minoritarian’¹ mode of touch. Like Beatrice and Cressida, they create what could be called circumstances of suspension. They introduce a certain distance which suspends habitual proceedings, regulated by an established order of things, and makes relationships of touch possible. This is not a simple thing to do. On the contrary, artistry is required to bring about relationships of touch. Beatrice masterfully suspends the referential and contractual power of speech, smoothing the way for linguistic caresses. Hamlet’s theatrical madness works in a similar fashion, facilitating the distribution of contaminating touches. Richard’s attitude towards truth and reliable speech acts is well known. Handing over his sword to Lady Anne exposes his successful strategy of suspending the (gendered) social order and working his way up to the throne in a minoritarian fashion, using the anarchic powers of touch. Hector sparing Ajax incurs his combatants’ disapproval, making him an outsider. He suspends the killing of the defeated enemy and thereby makes an encounter ‘in other arms’ possible. However, as Hector’s case illustrates, encounters in the mode of touch are fragile. Touching requires exposing oneself to the other, ‘unfolding oneself’, as the beginning of *Hamlet* puts it. The vulnerability implied always involves a certain risk – the risk of the state of suspension coming to an end and the fragile (caressing) mutuality shifting to violence. When the distance constitutive for touch is bridged, the boundaries break and a different relationship comes to the fore: the (mortal) combat of one against the other, which aims for the annihilation of the other, for the dissolution of all tension – eat or be eaten.

It is no coincidence that touch in Shakespeare’s theatre is not only associated with femininity and minoritarian status, but also with the art of theatre itself. Richard, the ‘deepe dissimuler’, is a ‘deep tragedian’; Beatrice’s and Benedick’s ‘empty’ speech acts mirror the theatrical use of language;

Pandarus's matchmaking brings not only the intra-fictional couple, but also play and audience into (potentially infectious) contact. There are structural reasons for theatre's astonishing capacity for touch, which, paradoxically, is made possible by establishing unbridgeable distance. The divide of stage and audience – or rather, since the spatial boundary can well be crossed, the impossibility of penetrating the boundary of fiction – create a remarkably stable, paradigmatic state of suspension. As elaborated upon in the introduction, the particularities of early modern theatre (its natural light, its being architecturally less optimised for visual illusion than for bodily proximity) intensify the power of its state of suspension and the structural mutuality it entails.

Shakespeare's plays produce and reflect upon (at least) two significant theatrical experiences. First, although all the 'substantial' sources of bodily and legally binding impact and personal emotional attachment thought to be responsible and necessary for any kind of change in the real world are suspended, theatre proves itself able to touch, to move its audience. 'What' is it that has this capacity to move? As we have seen in *Hamlet*, *The Tempest* and *Richard III*, Shakespeare's theatre revolves around this very question. The 'insubstantial', the 'bottomless', the 'shallow', the 'superficial' (that is, ontologically minor instances) are discovered to be influential actants that contribute significantly to the way of the world. With this observation, theatre not only affirms its own power, but also questions the hegemonic, the *major* ontological intuitions that prevail outside theatre's *minor* heterotopos. This is not an abstract, philosophical argument (which would probably be of little use to the theatregoer), but has social effects that can be experienced in the theatre. Second, in *Troilus and Cressida*, *Much Ado* and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare exposes the social effect arising from the insubstantial, from processes of touch that are not ontologically or epistemologically grounded. Communities

emerge out of con-tact, out of com-passion, out of suffering together, without any framing criterion of sameness or a common enemy that would hold the community together. Troilus and Ulysses watching Cressida flirt with Diomedes epitomise this theatrical community of touch. Touch brings together heterogeneous partners (they are enemies, fighting each other on the battlefield), and they stay enemies. There is no reason for them to form a community, and yet they do. It is a temporal, a fragile one, but sufficiently stabilised by the theatrical spectacle they witness. Beatrice and Benedick's relationship also comes about as a community of touch. It is 'based' on lies, set up as a theatrical spectacle, formed by non-contractual, void speech acts – and yet it is not fake. Something loving, an unmistakable linguistic caress, happens in their approximation that always maintains the (productive and lively) tension of repulsion.

As the onstage theatre-watchers Troilus and Ulysses show, these theatrical experiences do not simply come to the audience without their assistance. Their discussion leads to an agreement that shows the basic traits of a theatrical contract which also spells out the constitutive characteristics of touch. They agree to be 'all patience', meaning two things: 1) to respect the boundary between the spectacle they are watching and their hideout, that is, not to interfere with what they experience (aspect of distance!); 2) to expose themselves to the spectacle, to 'unfold' themselves to what they experience, not to be shy of contact and run away (aspect of nearness, of being an 'encounterer').

What are *we* to make of this 'touchophile' attitude, we scholars, whose job it is to come into touch with theatre, with performance and with texts? Can we agree on a 'contract of contact' that, as Shakespeare's audiences do, further unleashes the forces of the insubstantial and helps distribute and amplify the capacities of Shakespearean theatre? I think it a difficult but all the more important challenge for academic writing to

join the community of touch and compassion, extending its reach beyond the walls of the theatre into the realm of intellectual production and university teaching. The aim must be to not lose touch and thereby deprive Shakespeare's theatre of its power to move and affect the way of the world.

Inspired by Shakespeare's theatre and its affinity to touch, my study has attempted to perform what can be called a 'philology of touch', whose main objective is to be sensitive to and distribute the (affective, conceptual, social) capacities of the works of art to which it is dedicated. In order to do so, it has to find a position in touch with the text or artistic production, instead of writing *about* a piece of art from the 'objective' but untouchable position of a god-observer. Paradoxically, this 'inside' position is a minoritarian one: it can neither claim a more direct, immediate grasp of things nor the security of the stable, reliable contextualising framing, which always presupposes the idea of an objective, majoritarian standpoint. This does not mean to bracket all historical, epistemological or cultural knowledge, but asks for patience. A philology of touch does not undertake a journey of expedition which starts in well-known territory, setting out into the unknown in order to complete the map of the world until no white spots are left. Instead, it starts from the middle. It begins with an encounter and attempts to make this encounter a fruitful one, from which intellectual, political and social impulses issue. That is all.

There cannot be a guarantee of success, but there are certain conditions to be met in order to make a touching encounter possible. We have come across and have found models for these conditions in the preceding chapters. The productive nearness of touch demands respect for and care of distance. This is much easier said than done, because of the basic operation of the humanities: understanding something, always entails comprehending it, *grasping* it, making it one's one. *Grasping* as appropriation annihilates the

distance constitutive for touch, and thereby brings an end to any touching encounter. Creating the situation of suspension that we have encountered in Shakespeare's theatre is therefore a central task for a philology of touch. Similarly to theatre and its basic structure, philology, in its love for texts, resorts to structural help in stabilising the productive distance needed for a situation of suspension. Texts are never quite present. Reading Shakespeare intensifies this initial situation: the centuries separating us historically, culturally and epistemologically from Shakespeare's theatre present an obstacle for a thorough understanding of it – however, they facilitate productive, touching encounters. The tension between historicising and making Shakespeare 'present' has proven to be enormously productive in Shakespeare Studies, perhaps the most proliferating intellectual 'problem' of recent decades. A philology of touch affirms this tension. Not as a conflict or a 'problem' to be solved, but as a situation of suspension which provides the perfect conditions for a touching intellectual encounter.

My study has taken this in-between as its starting point. All that is needed to proceed in the mode of a philology of touch can be learned from Troilus, Horatio, Hamlet or any open-minded theatregoer: the readiness to expose oneself to the forces and affects of theatre and texts, to cease control, to unfold oneself, to become an 'encounterer'. The aim is not to tame anything that is about to happen by immediately translating it into the realm of the well-known, but to give it room for development according to its own, probably different rules and to become sensitive to its effects and functioning. It is therefore necessary to *initially* suspend any framing or knowledge and to hold back intuition and rapid understanding. The intellectual distance established in this way asks to be supplemented by entering into a nearness to the 'textual surface' which we encounter. Getting in touch with text and the performance of text means reading it as closely

as possible, following the minutest textual detail in order to let this overly complex net of significations take maximum effect. Then: listen to the resonances issued by the reading. It is here that all the knowledge, context and framing come into play. Whatever chimes with the reading (that is, whatever amplifies its effect) can now be brought to it. This may be historicising context, epistemological background, anachronistic theory or problems of the twenty-first century – the only criterion (and this is a very harsh, selective criterion!) is that the result has the capacity to touch *with* the text, and thus to make a difference.

What might sound like an academic ‘anything goes’ proves to be the very contrary in practice: a textual encounter that does not merely talk about a text, contextualise it, or force it to support some preformed idea, but instead engenders an unforeseeable intellectual, political or critical stimulus *together with it* is highly improbable. Doing justice or living up to a text may be a question of touch – of ‘give and take’, as Cressida would say, of a mutuality that cannot be academically enforced or stabilised, but has to be desired. Shakespeare’s theatre might contaminate us with this desire – which could be called philo-logy.

Note

1. The notion of ‘minoritarian’ versus majoritarian is borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, esp. 351–423 and *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.