Introduction

A Witness Fit for Purpose

This book arose out of work for the *Records of Early Drama: Scotland* project. Its original aim was to identify and discuss instances of early Scottish play and ceremonial which might be found in chronicles, as a way of complementing the more prolific sources of such information: the management records of kirk, burgh and other private and public bodies. However, like all battle plans, it failed to survive the first encounter with the enemy. It became obvious that various kinds of activity, while not plays or even ceremonial in the modern sense, were nonetheless theatrical in nature and effect, and that the narrative sources were keen to pass these episodes on to the reader. The chronicle writers wanted to take what had originally been witnessed with the eyes, narrate it, and permit their readers through this translation to witness the events again in their imaginations. The ambiguity of the term 'witness' seemed helpful: issues of value and spectatorship were implicit in the process, in that these narrative texts were bearing witness to events which had originally been recognized as significant, and were, in turn, recreating that spectatorial experience for the reader, and declaring its value in doing so. Simon Shepherd has written recently, 'Theatre is an art of bodies witnessed by bodies. Witnesses are something more than passive viewers. In the act of witnessing a person attests to the truth of something that is or was present for them.'[1] In looking at theatricality, rather than examples of theatre, my book does not focus so closely on bodies, and does not insist on the witness actually being present, since theatricality can be presented to the imagination through memory or tradition, but it agrees completely that value-laden witnessing is at the core, both of theatre and theatricality. The transmissory process of witnessing, which turns theatrical event into chronicle narrative in order to permit it to be revisualized, raises intriguing questions. These include what analytical approach might be suitable for deriving the originating theatrical event from the narrative matrix in which it is now fixed; whether such a derivation can be made at all; and how far one's own analysis continues the process of translation and renarrativization. What began as an attempt to identify actual instances of play became something very different under the pressure of such questions: a more self-reflexive study of different kinds of theatricality as they were transmitted in a quite different mode of reproduction: the continuous narrative.

[1] Simon Shepherd, *Theatre, Body and Pleasure* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 73. This excellent book came out when I was putting the finishing touches to this one; I was able to make some reference to it, but probably not as much as it deserves.

My own narrative seeks to give substance to these topics through a selection from the many events of a theatrical nature which were recorded in chronicle form. But it also explores the local historical and cultural context of the events and their transmission so as to explain why bearing witness to them might have appeared important to the writer, and hence why the writer enabled the reader to witness them again in the mind's eye. This book is focused on instances where a chronicle text has left us a record of something – an action, person, object or combinations of these – specially displayed to spectators. In all cases the textual record implicitly or, more often, explicitly acknowledges the value of the display for contemplation by spectators, whether these were present at the original event or were to behold the spectacle at second hand through the textual lens of its recorder. Usually it is evident that the narrative is re-sponsoring an event which constituted a display for spectators when it originally happened. However, with the original event now lost to us, it may sometimes be the case that the narrative is simply continuing an earlier oral or written tradition of presenting and valuing the event in this way. And on one occasion, it is probable that the narrative actually imparted to events a theatricality which they originally lacked. In all cases, the specific meaning which it was proposed spectators should take from the display was finally that of the recorder, who infused it with the wider meanings of the narrative in which it was included. However, it seems likely that in several cases the value which the event had for the original participants and spectators was retained to some degree and made accessible through the later textual record.

Early Scottish use of the word 'theatre' is usually humanist and does not occur before the sixteenth century. It applies to ancient theatres, and translates either *theatrum* or *scaena* in the sense of a 'stage'.[2] It is not a word in common use in those records which tell us about actual performances. Although the term 'theatrical' is of even later sixteenth-century use, it is hard to find a single contemporary word which would do as well to describe the condition shared by the events which form the substance of this book, although many of them are from pre-sixteenth-century texts.[3] The usual term used at the time for activities we would now define as 'theatre' was 'play', and 'playing place' is used by Gavin Douglas as the Scots term for a theatre. 'Play', with its Latin equivalent *ludus*, covered then, as now, a much wider range of phenomena than formal, scripted drama, and there was no comparable adjective for the condition of being play-like. But many of the activities on which this book will concentrate do not even consistently fall within the broad realm of play. We will

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[2] *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue: From the Twelfth Century to the End of the Seventeenth* (*DOST*), ed. W.A. Craigie, new edn by A.J. Aitken, Margaret Dareau, K. Lorna Pike and James A.C. Stephenson, 12 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967–2002), s.v. 'theatre', 1 and 3.

[3] The *DOST* citation, from David Ferguson's sermons, is of a pejorative use of the term for Roman Catholic penitential practices, s.v. 'theatricall'. But since his emphasis, as in the examples I have chosen in the book, is on their outward display, it is a reasonable term to adopt, though without the full implications which the word had for Ferguson.

encounter episodes of assault and assassination, public petition, clerical interrogation, dissent, physical display through costume, the public performance of identity, tournament, preaching, and the varied spectatorship of tourism. Few of these would find their way into the *Records of Early Drama: Scotland* volumes as records of drama or ceremonial. Yet they share characteristics with the events which will. Some of them did indeed involve instances of play as it would have been understood at the time and would be recognized now, but most were neither examples of play nor were they 'playful' in the sense of offering recreation to either participants or spectators. They all, to varying degrees and in varying respects, possessed a number of the features one might find in play or in activities designated as plays at the time – they might be kinetic, verbal, visually striking, mimetic of an underlying narrative action, instructive, humorous; they might involve costume, signifying properties, ritualistic action, confrontation between participants or interaction with audience; and they often give the impression of having occupied a privileged location in physical space and time in an analogous way to theatre.

What they all had in common with each other and with the world of play was that they were 'shows'. Their formal characteristics, intended functions, or subsequent social value varied considerably, but they were all deliberately *shown* to spectators for a purpose. While the words 'shows' and 'spectatorship' are perhaps less tendentious and do address the core of these events, I will also use 'theatricality' in the book because it is important to see where different kinds of cultural experience touch and overlap. These events did contribute to theatricality in the public domain, and they did share characteristics with plays, even if one would not classify them all as such. A further reason for not seeking to avoid the tendentiousness of the word is that it is evident that the border between what was play-like, or in our terms 'theatrical', and what might be properly designated a play was itself argued over at the time. To call something a play was not a value-neutral act. For some, it could be seriously denigratory, carrying overtones of falsehood and imputing political illegitimacy to those responsible for the event. But even if no such term was used and no such imputation was made, several of the events in this volume had their special value and character because they did lie on the borderline between play and non-play, and they raised the question for spectators, or even other participants, as to whether they might be safely regarded as playful or whether they needed a more serious response.

The accounts which form the bulk of this book have been taken from genres of storytelling: the national or institutional chronicle, the autobiographical memoir and, lastly, the travel journal. Any instances of theatricality which they recorded were intended literally to tell a story or be part of a story, and they were consciously formed as episodes within a larger narrative. In that respect they were unlike the records which produce most of our knowledge about early forms of theatricality and the majority of specific instances of play.

Anyone who has worked through the substantial records of early Scottish economic, legal and judicial business – the inventories, 'retours', 'breves', 'sasines',

food bills, harvest payments, summonses, records of absence from court and so on – will be familiar with the multiplied, yet reduced, image which such quotidian detail presents of lives which were at once more varied and more whole. The lens of such management records seems to miss the excitement of people's plans or their introspection, their memories and desires; what appears seems smaller than it should be and somehow beside the point, rather like revisiting a house one lived in a long time ago. But it is in these records that one learns most, though sometimes quite incidentally, about how, where, when and why ordinary people experienced theatricality in their lives, and how much it cost others to supply it. Chronicles offer a different kind of evidence, richer and yet more restricted in its scope, as this book will show. But chronicle records, whether of a nation or an individual, and management records have certain features in common. Both seek to record what is past in order to cope with the present and propose a direction for the future, though their emphases on these different activities, and their explicitness about them, may vary, and the kind of control which they attempt to exert over events differs considerably. Both reveal the ideological narratives of the institutions within which and for which they were produced. They evidence its concerns, goals and attitudes through their selection of material to address, their treatment of it and the tone they betray while doing so. Both types of record employ rhetorical devices to shape the material towards their ends, though, for example, management records use the rhetoric of power and control rather than the chronicle's persuasive rhetoric of the instructional exemplum. Both, in a sense, reduce the contending voices of the original events to the voice of the text, incorporating them and subordinating them to new purposes; but both attempt to give the contrary impression, namely, that the form and nature of the written account were determined by the original events rather than by the choices of the recorder. Both also may draw upon existing writing from which to construct their text: the chronicler frequently incorporated the work of others, though the writer of memoir or personal journal did so less frequently; the management recorders for their part deliberately employed existing protocols to assert continuity in authority and its practices.

On the other hand, whatever ideological narratives both types of record betray, and whatever new critical narratives the scholar might make them serve in turn, the fact is that chronicle accounts tend to offer formally continuous narrative aiming at completeness at the episodic level, while management records, though sometimes achieving this, do not need to do so, and are often discontinuous or fragmentary by necessity. Consequently, the reader feels the controlling power of a narratorial voice more strongly in the first kind of record even if the content has been quoted directly from elsewhere and the author would not assert the narrative voice to be their own. The chronicler may be self-effacing, drawing on the authority of other texts, but the management recorder's task from the outset is consistently to ventriloquize the institution. One reads the former with a sense that a single voice is important and the latter with a sense that it is an institutional or group voice that determines the meaning. These differences, which are more extreme if one includes the personal

journal or memoir within the genre of chronicle writing, result in very different types of witness to theatricality. Most obviously, chronicle records of theatricality tend to be longer and more self-contained, including the context of the event along with the event itself. They sometimes seek to recreate the impression which the original event could have given and, when they are eyewitness accounts, may also reveal the unconscious desires of the author, though in one case we will study the author avoided personal revelations where possible. They raise different questions about tradition, genre, transmission and authenticity from those prompted by management records. They are more self-consciously literary.[4] They force the reader towards acknowledging self-reflexivity in text and the rhetoricizing intrinsic to the production of text. They also make it relatively easy for the reader to see the text as providing a *possible* representation of events rather than the facts of events.[5] One might say, therefore, that they help this book to be 'document-based' rather than naïvely 'documentarist' in the sense decried by post-modernist historians such as Keith Jenkins or Robert Berkhofer.[6] In sum, this book concentrates on witnesses which overtly tell a story; it asks what kinds of witnesses they prove to be, and what we can learn from them. It looks in particular at their textuality – the written rhetoricized discourse through which is revealed the ideology of the culture which produced and used the documents. The following anecdote points up the kinds of problems which they pose.[7]

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4 In certain respects, the chronicles might be thought to continue the tradition of 'mixed voice' writing, in which the author spoke and also introduced speaking characters. Medieval commentators identified epic poems, such as the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*, as examples of this. But I have not developed this point because the chronicles are not poems, even if they sometimes contain poetry. The more obvious development of the tradition is through works such as Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in which the line between the narrator's and characters' voices can often get blurred. Only in the episode discussed below in Chapter 4 does this blurring happen. See P.B. Salmon, 'The "Three Voices" of Poetry in Mediæval Literary Theory', *Medium Ævum*, 30 (1961): 1–18 (here 3, 5).

5 Although it will argue that narrative is an important element in the recording of early theatricality, the agenda of this book was not directly set by the many theoretical studies which have emerged in the last 25 years on the relation of history and narrative. A good place to start on this topic is the *History and Narrative Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Roberts (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), which includes many of the seminal essays in the field.

6 *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 11–12; Robert Berkhofer, 'The Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice', in Jenkins, *Postmodern History Reader*, pp. 139–55 (reprinted from *Poetics Today* 1988). See also Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 12–13.

7 A recent historian of Scottish records began their Preface expressing distaste for 'excessively autobiographical' prefaces. While sympathising with this, I would point out that the present anecdote is included precisely because it shows the difficulties attending even a first-person, eyewitness account of an event.

Some years ago, on a trip to the Medieval English Theatre conference, in a city which shall remain nameless, I found myself in the local police station instead. What happened was this: The bus from the train station had to make some fairly difficult lane changes and, following one of these, a car pulled up alongside, its driver got out and knocked on the bus window. The bus driver opened it; the car driver said, 'Do you know Mr Pope?'; the bus driver said he didn't; the car driver then punched him in the mouth, and started back to his car. At this point, quite a few things happened. I got off the bus through the door which was open for incoming passengers, went round to the front, pointedly copied down the assailant's registration number and returned to my seat to wait for the police. The bus driver radioed in to say he had been assaulted; practically everyone else on the bus left because they knew that now the bus wasn't going anywhere; I wrote down notes of what had happened on the scrap of paper where I had recorded the registration. The driver's supervisor arrived and sent him home, and the police arrived and took me to the police station.

The scene now shifts to the station. At some point, possibly before my statement was taken, the sergeant was told that the car driver had phoned in from home to apologize for the assault, and would be visited and cautioned later. Giving my statement was a strange affair. It began, 'My name is John McGavin and I am a lecturer at Southampton University.' But these were not my words; they were not what I would have thought of saying first about the episode. They were spoken and written down by the sergeant, who also wrote something like, 'at no time did I see the bus driver do anything which would have led to the assault'. I suggested that it would be easier if I composed and physically wrote my own statement, but was told that that was not the best way. I seem to remember the sergeant saying: 'Oh no, I write the statement.' After that it was thank you, goodbye, and a late interruption of my colleague's paper.

But, of course, that was not the end of it. It certainly was the end for me of the legal side of things. I kept the notes for a year but never heard any more about it and presume that there was no prosecution. It may have been the end of the event itself, but it was not the end of the story. The punch took an instant; the physical or psychological repercussions wore off, one hopes, before long, but the driver, the assailant and the witness probably still carry separate narratives of the event in their heads, depending on the event's significance for each of them. Of course, failures of memory or death may have removed some of the potentially intersecting narratives which might constitute the enduring reality of this long-past episode. It is unlikely that my police statement exists, but if it does, that institutional narrative is different both from what was in its signatory's head at the time, and very different from what has developed through retellings of the story to friends. If it is found by a record-reader 500 years from now, they might not realize that it is quite different in rhetorical devices, more selective in detail, more assertive in tone, and is aimed to meet quite different needs from any other narrative of the event which might exist or ever existed.

The policeman was correct: it was much better that he, knowing that the outcome of the attack would never be more than a verbal caution, should ensure that the narrative fitted that outcome. Left to the witness, there would have been dubiety, ambiguity, uncertainty: I thought I heard the assailant sound his car horn when the driver changed lanes, though I could not be sure that it was his; I thought at the time that the bus driver had changed lanes rather abruptly. The policeman knew that neither of these things was material to the outcome, and so the narrative actually said 'at no time did I see the bus driver do anything which would have led to the assault'. Issues of motivation were irrelevant in the precise context within which the document functioned, so no grounds of motivation were admitted, however central they might be to a future researcher aiming to understand the culture of the late twentieth century. In the police statement I emerge as an authoritative and reliable witness, fit for purpose, and so the statement might be considered suitable data for a study of late twentieth-century urban violence. However, that fitness for purpose would be an illusion created by the police. In addition, such a study would have to overcome the difficulty that the present text has now added another narrative of the event, specifically a metanarrative, written for a different purpose to the one written by the police officer.

The reader has no easy way of knowing whether anything I have said in the foregoing paragraphs actually happened. Perhaps the whole story was made up to suit the purposes of the present book. I can affirm that it was not, but can the reader be sure? Furthermore, from the very first telling of the story to this last, my witness narrative has been (and could not avoid being) created from a set of limiting circumstances: my own physical position in the original scene; my choice of things to notice, which was directed by influences such as upbringing, outlook and my sense of conventions and genres in public life; the part I was determined to play in bringing an assailant to justice, and how far that determination was coloured by the genre of drama from which the earlier account drew its phraseology ('the part … to play'); a selective memory, changing as time has gone on under the stimulus of other narratives of other scenes; language choices in the retellings; rhetorical intentions towards successive audiences and renewed attempts to make a coherent narrative out of what was an imperfectly organized set of sensations at the time.

If one looks again at the earlier retelling of the event, some of these features become clear, though they might require a good deal of analysis, if someone in the future were studying the story from the same distance as exists between the present book and the historical records which will provide the material for future chapters. For example, there is no mention of links between the scenes. I only have the haziest recollection of being in the police car between the bus and the station, and none at all of how I got to the conference after giving the statement. Lacking this structural coherence in the narrative, I opted in writing up my narrative for terminology from a different genre, drama, in which gaps of space and time are more readily managed: 'The scene now shifts to the station.' Omitted entirely from the record was what figures now most prominently in the memory: the visual contrast between the bright

sunny day outside, where the attack took place, and the dark, rather subterranean, impression of the police room where I gave a statement. Even in my own mind I am suspicious about this contrast, and mentally censor the memory so that the police station, probably at the time only suggestive of the cluttered 'mateyness' of the contemporary television crime drama, *Z Cars*, is not dampened and darkened by subsequent visual imagery from *Blade Runner*: it is hard to remember the event, and virtually impossible to narrate it, without the rhetoric of associated genres reaching out to encompass it. That is probably why I censored the entire contrast out of the narrative, despite thereby misrepresenting my current memory of the events.

But even if this narrative has eschewed any aspects which might encourage the interpellation of received imagery, there are other features of the narrative which draw it closer to the psychiatrically recognized condition of 'confabulation', in which details or whole narratives are fabricated to satisfy what the speaker thinks the hearer wants to hear. In this case there are subtle signs of the author's desire for coherence, credibility and audience satisfaction. In at least two cases there is explanatory detail which reflects a subsequent rationalization or explanation of what happened. When I said that I got off the bus, I added 'through the door which was open for incoming passengers', anticipating any concerns that my reader might have about continuity in the event. When I said that I had taken down notes, it was 'on the scrap of paper where I had recorded the registration', neatly sidestepping for myself, and the reader, the issue of why it was that, being on his way to a conference, and with a huge notepad in his case, the witness had not done the thing properly and written out a complete account. These details in the record have hidden narrator-serving functions, though they masquerade as factual and promote the notion of a sound, particularized account.

If one steps back from the narrative and views it as the creation of someone else, further questions arise: Why did the narrator say that he 'pointedly' wrote down the registration number? Who was intended to get the point? *In propria persona* I can reply that it was indeed done pointedly so that the assailant would see that he had not got away with it. That pointedness was probably why the whole story came to the end it did. Had the assailant not seen the number being copied down, he might not have thought it prudent to phone the police station in advance of any enquiry; had he not phoned, the whole event might have been either 'unsolved' or required more investigation. If one were reading the story at a distance of many years, how would that 'pointedly' appear? One might miss it or even treat it as insignificant for the event as a whole, or indicative rather of a self-dramatizing author. It is doubtful that one would see in it a clue to why the event turned out as it did – quickly wrapped up by the police with a confession, and hence the very reason why nothing but an assertive, no-nonsense witness statement was needed.

If apparently explanatory details or descriptive adverbs employed in such a narrative may offer a glimpse more of the narrator than of the event, or may disguise their deeper significance for the narrative as a whole, one might think that moments of direct speech would offer a clearer window on the past. One presumes that such

words stuck in the mind of the recorder because they were remarkable at the time; indeed, that they were remembered precisely because they were a striking feature of the event. Quoted words seem to have a particularity, a specificity, which defies the blurring of time and the partiality of report. But complications arise here also. The one instance of direct speech in the above report which appears to pose no problems of interpretation or authenticity, that is the statement, ‘at no time did I see the bus driver do anything which would have led to the assault’, was, in fact, the one statement which was never made orally, was not composed by the witness and was an extremely partial account both of the events and the witness’s response to them.

Passing on to the narrative’s report of what the policeman said: ‘Oh no, I write the statement’, this also seems extremely suspect with hindsight. The record seems to offer too easy a metacommentary on police manipulation; it is too redolent of hippy distrust of anything the authorities might say or do. So, one might ask, was this actually said, or was it intruded into the narrative to make a neat structural antithesis with the witness’s request to write his own statement? Even that is only part of the question, for, even if the statement wasn’t made quite so baldly and with such a rhetorical obviousness, it is still possible that something *like* it was said. So this generically loaded statement might have been either the complete invention of the reporter, or it might be a rhetorical embellishment on an emerging narrative of suspect police methods. But a third possibility exists, and it is one rarely invoked in historical interpretations: irony. It is quite possible that the statement was indeed made in just the way reported, but that the officer was himself conscious of the generic possibilities of the situation, of the potentially critical narratives which could be formed around police procedures. Forced to act as he did, he ironized the action, showing himself fully aware of the humour of the situation. If this was the case, then the report of the event is accurate in detail, but constitutes a serious misrepresentation nonetheless, being very partial in its overall invocation of genre: it invites the reader to laugh at a man who was himself laughing at the narrative potential of his act. Such misrepresentation is actually very bad form, in life as in scholarship; rather like offering for public excoriation in the ‘Pseud’s Corner’ section of *Private Eye* writing which was deliberately comic in its pretentiousness: laughing *at*, when one should properly laugh *with*. If the episode were of genuine historical significance, this report would have seriously simplified events in a way which would homogenize history to a single narrative, imposing on the reader a rather childish account at the expense of the complexity which comes from the fact that all individuals can make use of genre with ironic self-consciousness, whether they are protagonists, antagonists or reporters, past or present. One should not deny to people in the past the capacity to be self-ironizing in relation to the genres of speech, of expectation and of context which they knew they shared with their interlocutors. Nor should one accept past ironies only when they come in a safe literary form such as Chaucer’s poetry, where the irony is spelled out through a careful control of context.

The natural response to such a problem is, of course, to ask me, the recorder, ‘Well, *did* the policeman’s tone or his intonation or a telling glance indicate this

self-conscious ironizing?' Such recourse to the writer is not possible with historical documents, of course, but the problem is not just one for the archive scholar for, after some years, the present recorder simply can't remember, and perhaps even at the time was not alert enough to pick it up. While writing this record now it is relatively easy to construct the scene in the theatre of the imagination. Imputing a self-ironizing performance to the policeman might form part of that mental theatre, but to do so is inevitably to privilege the present over the past. Although tone can completely alter the meaning of an event through its capacity to reshape context, it is also evanescent and requires an alert original narrator who was not just conscious of it but also recognized the need to narrativize it for future readers. It is asking too much of historical records that they provide us with the raised eyebrow or the slightly over-exaggerated emphasis on a word, even though these are the foundations of our daily interpretations of event. Perhaps a principal difference between the historian's and the literary critic's engagement with writing the past is that the former finds this loss relatively more acceptable than the latter.

The most striking instance of quoted speech in the account is also the most enigmatic, the assailant's question, 'Do you know Mr Pope?' If one were reading this record at a distance of some hundreds of years, one might assume that its opacity resulted from historical distance and one's ignorance of contemporary idiom. But in this case, the statement was just as opaque to the contemporary witness and, apparently, to the bewildered bus driver. Its consequence was certainly to distract the bus driver, but whether that was its intended function is less clear – the attack could have happened just as easily without it. Even more obscure are why that particular question was asked, and whether it meant anything privately to the assailant. At the very least, it offered a challenge to the victim, making him confront something which should have meaning but did not, and, linguistically, it broke the normal contracts of conversation in advance of a more serious breach of social decorum, the physical assault. Prima facie, the statement was just a verbal correlative to the punch: both took the victim aback. A song by the rock band REM was entitled, 'What's the Frequency, Kenneth?' This strange statement, lifted from USA commercial radio, was uttered by people involved in a street assault in America, and had no apparent meaning for any of the innocent parties, victim, witness or police. Perhaps, if one were trying to understand the reported attack on the bus driver from a historical distance, one would do better to look at the psycholinguistics of crime, searching for genres, conventions and idioms specific to that activity rather than trying to understand it within the textually determined genres one customarily employs when analysing historical records. If all this seems rather far from the kind of problem one might face reading early Scottish documents, it should be noted that this book will actually include a medieval record of a public assault in which the attack was similarly accompanied by a strange and distracting remark.[8] Unpacking its meaning proved easier than for the statement which I actually heard, because the allusion

[8] See the story of Robert Prendergest in Chapter 2 'Enacting Revenge'.

involved in it was more readily traceable, which was probably why the remark entered tradition and was subsequently written down. But whether that statement was actually made by the medieval assailant, let alone understood by the victim, is another question, and one which will probably never be answered.

Perhaps the most striking point about this episode is that only now does one have a named genre in which to place it. Any reader will now recognize that it was an instance of road rage. However, the witness did not drive at the time so had little experience of the phenomenon, and it was not a concept or term he had encountered in 1975. The first written example of the phrase in a British English source did not appear until 1995, 20 years after this event.[9] Consequently, the witnessing took place innocent of the very generic classification which one would now employ to limit the strangeness of the event, and to locate it in a broad cultural context with definite comparators, some much more serious in character. Perhaps if the witness had had the concept and the name for the event at the time, its strangeness would not have lasted in his memory, and he would not have felt the need to narrate it and, in doing so, to try to identify and understand its component parts. This book will show that ignorance or misapprehension of genre was a recurring feature of those stories of public theatricality which the chroniclers chose to record.

The preceding account poses questions similar to those prompted by the extended narrative records of historical theatricality which will provide the main substance of this book. The challenges are similar though this event itself was not self-consciously theatrical, nor the account deliberately rhetoricized in the service of good writing; the report was that of an eyewitness, and there were no intervening stages of transmission by anyone else or in another medium between the event and the written record. Issues surrounding the narrator, the process of transmission through memory (or, more usually, through the combination of memory and text), the genres which affected the written account and the rhetorical devices chosen for it, the likely intended audience, selection of detail, missing elements of context or tone, narrative structure and conclusiveness, the potential factuality of direct speech and so on, all bear upon what meaning can be drawn from such a document. They are traditionally literary-critical issues, but it is evident that no historian can avoid engaging with them, especially if the ultimate aim is to move beyond such matters to the wider significance of the document for the society which produced and 'consumed' it.

None of the phenomena which historians research is available in its original form. What once was event is now text, and one kind of action has been overtaken by others: in the world of theatre, the player, the payer, the scene painter give way to the chronicler, the recorder, the accountant, the researcher. Thus, understanding past public acts of theatricality from the extant documents paradoxically involves valorizing only the vestigial records of the senses. The sensations of curiosity, delight, anxiety, anger, chagrin, wonder, illumination or sheer fun of it all, as

[9] *Oxford English Dictionary* online, http://dictionary.oed.com [accessed 10 February 2007].

experienced by the original spectators, have been replaced by something very different: written records supplied for their own purposes by other people employing different metaphors to explain matters to themselves; different language; other ways of dividing up the semantic field of pleasure; alternative rhetorics; different genres; different assumed historical endings, some of which would appear impossibly alien to modern readers. Such a transformation may appear more extreme when the original event is represented in the functional, fragmentary and often indifferent management records than when it is retold in chronicle, where there is often detail, context, response. But, if one is seeking an original, untextual truth, the chronicle is just as dangerous a source. From documentary vestiges one supposedly comes to an understanding of cultural phenomena whose 'affect' must have usually impressed more directly than their meaning. A search for original instances of theatricality is thus necessarily a sidestep into textuality, textual analysis, and into those ideas which might hold together, or distinguish, the different agendas which have intervened in the process of transmission. More fundamentally, however, it is difficult and possibly misconceived to draw a distinction between the original event and narrational versions of it.

Even participants in events, as I was in the incident of the bus driver, mentally shape the unfolding experience through existing genres, rhetorics, structuring devices, comparators. As past is brought to serve the present need, the new event is already caught in a similaic process by which the participant looks for existing notions which will point to the correct response, or aid comprehension. The more unusual the experience, the more likely it is that its protagonist will look for existing generic or conventional features to aid understanding. Thus the sequence of events gradually mutates into a structure of events, that structure being formed from genres already in the mind of the protagonist. As it is forming, the structure with its generic affinities also carries implicit endpoints, and consequently, a more fully fledged mental narrative is beginning even as the events are being lived through. As soon as one ceases to react instinctively and begins to think, let alone to reflect, genre options flood in, giving one control over the particular by leeching out its specificity into the general, and offering a choice of explanatory narratives which have themselves been formed from other events, other stimuli, other media. These shaping notions may be formed before or during the participation in the act; sometimes they emerge after it, and all can be altered in retrospect. The psychology of witnessing has been a matter of study in legal and psychological circles for a number of years. A recent guide argues that there are three stages in the process: encoding, storage and retrieval. Of the first of these, 'the stage at which information is acquired', the editors write, 'most encoding … involves some information already stored in semantic memory in the form of prior knowledge derived from past experience'.[10] Sometimes one

[10] *Analysing Witness Testimony: A Guide for Legal Practitioners and Other Professionals*, ed. Anthony Heaton-Armstrong, Eric Shepherd and David Wolchover (London: Blackstone, 1999), p. 9. Witness memory is discussed pp. 3–16 and contamination of witness memory pp. 19–28.

does not exactly know what kind of event is occurring and only in retrospect does some helpful notion like the concept of road rage make it clearer. But that is a new notion; the shape of original experience begins to be altered by that new notion, however helpful it might subsequently appear to be. When an event is recorded, or contemplated retrospectively, the perceptions of genre, rhetoric, structure and so on which operated at the time of the original action are then overwritten like a palimpsest. All are then susceptible to further overwritings by the person who tries to understand the account. Furthermore, when an event is retrospectively contemplated or recorded or when that record is interpreted, nothing in the original set of shaping and understanding procedures which helped the participant to control the experience can survive in exactly the same way – just as we are, and are not, the same person we were ten years or ten minutes ago. The subsequent record of an event may well contain traces of those earlier mental narratives, right from the one which was in the mind of the original participant, through the intermediate transmitters of the action in their different types of verbal account, to that of the final recorder. But how could one know that to be the case in a particular instance, or measure the difference? One can only explore the textuality of the records into which the event has been transmuted, possibly discovering stages in the process, but more often recognizing simply the different agendas present in the final record, and then supplying a further narrative of them. The following pages attempt such an exploration.