Balz Engler

Monumentalization

This is the introduction to the section “Monumental Shakespeare” in my collection of essays Constructing Shakespeares *(Dozwil: EDITION SIGNAThUR, 2019). 93-102. More details on the book under https://balzengler.ch/constructing-shakespeares-1.html*

In 1823 Zachary Craft published a pamphlet, in the shape of a play, describing “The First Sitting of the Committee on the Proposed Monument to Shakspeare,” which also turns out to be its last, as it adjourns *sine die* without being able to make a decision. Under peals of thunder famous dramatists and critics, from Aristotle onwards, appear and support the project. But the committee members cannot come to an agreement, except on its classical style, as each wants to see Shakespeare in a different, in his own, shape; only the Methodist minister Jedediah Scrupler is totally against (Craft 78). There are also views from abroad. Voltaire suggests (in French, of course):

> He is to be represented like his own Caliban, in his right hand holding his Hamlet, in the other a map of his island of Bohemia. At his feet a statue of Aristotle is to be placed, proof of his respect for him. Because he is without any rules, his monument should be so too. Put, therefore, the bases of the columns at the top, and the capitals at the bottom. The sculptor should not forget either to put at his feet our poor Corneille, Racine and Molière, learning from him new methods for the handling of their plays. (Craft 30-31, trans. BE).[1]

And from Germany Wilhelm S—l, obviously August Wilhelm Schlegel, writes in:

> I would erect at Stratford, a small amphitheatre, and place in the centre a statue of the poet; and let his canopy be the skies. Represent himself standing in a biga [a two-horse chariot] drawn by two Pegasi, Melpomene guiding one, and Thalia the other, with this inscription in gold letters on the biga—GENIO INSULARUM BRITANNICARUM. (Craft 41).

Craft’s pamphlet, no masterpiece, is of interest for at least two reasons: it shows, in its modest way, that Shakespeare—or perhaps I should write “Shakespeare,” because I am interested in a phenomenon in history rather than a person—does not only exist in literature and the theatre, but also in material culture. It also shows, in an Englishman’s caricature, how other nations see Shakespeare, and that this fact is at least worth some disparaging remarks. The representative of the French, with condescending irony, repeats the clichés ascribed to Voltaire and proposes a

[1] Qu’on le représente donc comme son propre Caliban, tenant dans la main droite son Hamlet, dans l’autre, une carte de son île de Bohème. Qu’on mette à ses pieds une statue d’Aristote, preuve de son respect pour lui. Puisqu’il est hors de toute règle lui-même, il faut que son monument le soit aussi. Mettez donc les bases des colonnes en haut, et les chapitaux en bas. Que le sculpteur n’oublie pas non plus, de mettre à ses pieds, nos pauvre Corneilles, Racine, et Molière, apprenant de lui de nouvelles méthodes pour la conduite de leur drames.

monument as blundering as his works. The German, with heavy seriousness, suggests a heroic monument full of learned classical allusion. But the countries not represented are also of interest: the United States are notably, but considering the date of Craft’s pamphlet not surprisingly, absent.

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What is a monument?

Three texts, from different cultures and different periods may suggest answers. The Austrian writer Robert Musil writes in his 1927 essay on monuments:

> the most notable thing is [...] that one does not notice them. There is nothing in the world that is as invisible as monuments.
> They have certainly been erected to be seen, even to attract attention, but at the same time they are waterproofed by something against attention, which trickles, like water drops on oilcloth, from them without stopping even for a moment.[2] (Musil 506).

As familiar as the experience described by Musil may be to us, it also reflects his modernist weariness with unquestioned tradition:

> Everything enduring loses its impressiveness. Everything that forms the walls of our lives, as it were, the backdrop of our consciousness, loses the ability to play a role in our consciousness.[3] (507).

In 1864, at a time when monuments began to crowd urban landscapes in France, things sound quite different. Victor Hugo writes:

> A monument is an example. The lofty head of a great man is a light. Crowds, like the waves, require beacons above them. It is good that the passer-by should know that there are great men. People may not have time to read; they are forced to see. One passes that way and stumbles against the pedestal; one is almost obliged to raise the head and glance a little at the inscription. Men escape a book; they cannot escape the statue. […] The people need such an introduction to their great men. The monument incites them to know more of the man. They desire to learn to read in order to know what this bronze means. A statue is a nudge to ignorance.[4] (Hugo, *Shakespeare* 285–86).

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[2] das Auffallendste ist [...], dass man sie nicht bemerkt. Es gibt nichts auf der Welt, was so unsichtbar wäre wie Denkmäler. Sie werden doch zweifellos aufgestellt, um gesehen zu werden, ja, geradezu, um die Aufmerksamkeit zu erregen; aber gleichzeitig sind sie durch irgend etwas gegen Aufmerksamkeit imprägniert, und diese rinnt Wassertropfen-auf-Ölbezug-artig an ihnen ab, ohne auch nur einen Augenblick stehen zu bleiben. (506) [trans. BE].

[3] Alles Beständige büßt seine Eindruckskraft ein. Alles, was die Wände unseres Lebens bildet, sozusagen die Kulisse unseres Bewusstseins, verliert die Fähigkeit, in diesem Bewusstsein eine Rolle zu spielen. (507) [trans. BE].

[4] Un monument est exemplaire. La haute tête d’un grand homme est une clarté. Les foules comme les vagues ont besoin de phares au-dessus d’elles. Il est bon que le passant sache qu’il y a des grands hommes. On n’a pas le temps de lire, on est forte de voir. On va par là, on se heurte

Whether such a nudge actually takes place and has the intended educational effect, may remain open. The power that Victor Hugo attributes to a monument, incidentally in a book about Shakespeare, is probably just as excessive as Musil’s belief in its total ineffectiveness.
Finally, Shelley’s sonnet “Ozymandias,” which deals with the *ruins* of a monument in the Egyptian desert. King Ozymandias (Ramses II) had it erected for himself, and it bears the inscription “Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!” The poem ends with the words:

> Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
> Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
> The lone and level sands stretch far away. (Shelley 340).

The poem deals with three kinds of transience: that of despotic regimes (an issue particularly dear to Shelley), that of meanings, and that of monuments themselves, erected precisely to overcome it.
One crucial move in the recovery of monuments as part of a culture’s life is to study them not simply as (aesthetic) objects, possibly including the space around them, as this has for long been common in studies of sculpture. Rather, they should be studied as being associated with certain social events, events that, in the minds of its begetters, should ritually repeat themselves forever, and thus raise the subject of the monument beyond the bounds of its time, and give each new period an opportunity to link up symbolically with the original spirit of the subject. In other words, the association of monuments and ritual should be taken seriously.
Anything may become a monument if it is submitted to such ritual practices. It may be a tree, for example the mulberry tree formerly in the garden of New Place in Stratford, supposedly planted by Shakespeare himself; it may be a giant statue like the Statue of Liberty in New York. It is its *use*, finally, that turns an object into a monument, and that is all-important for its social significance. Monuments are visited by people, not for any utilitarian purpose, but because they want to be, however briefly, in the presence of the original spirit, either of those represented or of those documenting their reverence. In many cases ceremonies are held to renew this spirit, annually and on a specific date. Processions take place, speeches are given, wreaths are laid down, and who attends, who speaks and what they say, and who gives a wreath and why, again tell us a great deal about the status of the monument’s subject.
The genesis of a monument[5] is of particular interest: it is a social process, beginning with often complex interactions between various social and political institutions (which

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au piédestal, on est bien obligé de lever la tête et de regarder un peu l’inscription, on échappe au livre, on n’échappe pas à la statue. […] Ce commencement de connaissance des grands hommes est nécessaire au peuple. Le monument provoque à connaître l’homme. On désire apprendre à lire pour savoir ce que c’est que ce bronze. Une statue est un coup de coude à l’ignorance. (Hugo, *Shakespeare* 205).

[5] Selbmann speaks of the “Entstehungs- und Gebrauchsgeschichte” (the history of erection and use) of monuments; (Selbmann 30).

ones?). In these it is decided who should be offered a monument (and implicitly who does not deserve one) and where funding should be sought. It is decided where it should be placed (why in this city? Why on the market rather than the cathedral square or the park?). It is decided what it should look like (should it include a figure, and if so should it sit or stand?). In many cases this leads to acrimonious debate and may result in the abortion of the whole project (as in Craft’s pamphlet). All these events tell us a great deal about the status of the subject to be honoured, and the values and interests of those involved.

The process of erecting a monument culminates in its unveiling, its dedication. Hugo gives a florid account of how he imagines the unveiling of a Shakespeare monument in London:

> Imagine the monument, imagine the inauguration. The Peers are there, the Commons follow, the bishops officiate, the princes join the procession, the Queen is present. […] Cannons boom, the curtain drops, the unveiled statue seems to say: ‘At length!’ (Hugo, *Shakespeare* 284).

It may be useful to remind ourselves of the religious associations of the term *to dedicate*: the *OED* defines it as “To devote (to the Deity or to a sacred person or purpose) with solemn rites; to surrender, set apart, and consecrate to sacred uses. (The leading sense, which more or less colours the others).”[6] The religious term indicates the gravity of this moment of transforma-tion, when the monument assumes its public task. The ceremony must be carefully planned, down to the seating arrangements and the menu of the formal dinner; the right persons, considered to represent the public, have to be there; and those addressing the festive crowd will emphasize the momentousness of the occasion by linking the subject monumentalized with others considered to be of great cultural value.

These processes give the monument an aura, which must then be renewed by regular ritual acts if it is not to be lost, for example by the annual laying down of wreaths (as at the Shakespeare monuments in Stratford and Weimar). Who pays for the wreaths? Who gives the speeches? (But the aura is also confirmed by the vandalism such monuments attract.) The rituals of renewal are different from the first dedication in at least one respect. There is now a double perspective. At the beginning there was an attempt to define the authentic meaning of the person celebrated. Now the result of that attempt has to be related to what the person has come to mean to a later generation. The historicity of the monument must then be either thematized or repressed.

Even though I have been stressing the event-aspect of monuments, the study of the actual object, as part of what I am describing, is crucial to their interpretation. Three relations need to be taken into account in particular: between the monument and its location, between the monument and what we know about the

[6] The German *einweihen* has exactly the same overtones.

object of reverence, and, in the case of monuments to persons, between the figure and the monument as a whole.

With monuments to writers, *location* is of particular interest. Books, by their nature, are not linked to a specific place. Unlike many monuments for battles, for example, which draw some of their strength from being placed on the field of the battle which they commemorate, monuments to writers will often try to *create* an association between the writers and a location.[7]

Monuments to Shakespeare have been erected all over the world. They tell us about what Shakespeare has meant at different times in different places to different people. Apart from innumerable busts in theatre lobbies, public buildings and homes, monuments to him (or to figures in his plays) were erected in England, in the capitals of the Empire, but also in the United States and elsewhere. To name but a few: Stratford-upon-Avon (Holy Trinity church, garden of New Place, Town Hall, Henley Street, Bancroft Gardens, the town as a whole); London (Westminster Abbey, Southwark Cathedral, Leicester Square); Glasgow (Theatre Royal); Weimar, Germany (Stadtpark); Helsingør, Denmark; Paris (melted down in 1941); Verona, Italy (Juliet’s House); Sydney, Australia (facing the State Library); New York (Central Park); Washington, D. C. (The Folger Library); Chicago (Lincoln Park); Philadelphia (Logan Circle); St. Louis, Missouri (Tower Grove Park); Pittsburgh, Ohio (Carnegie Institute); Montgomery, Alabama (State Theater); Stratford, Ontario (Festival grounds). Etc.

In the following essays five representative examples will be discussed, examples which illustrate the way Shakespeare was constructed in different places.

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One special monument to Shakespeare has not been mentioned yet: the 1623 Folio edition of his plays. Books in our culture in general have something to be revered about them, for reasons I can only hint at here, but they are related to the role of *the book* in Western culture, the Bible. A book as a monument, however, is unusual because, as indicated, unlike other monuments it does not create a link between the person honoured and a specific place.

The folio format chosen for the first collected edition of Shakespeare’s plays was the largest available and normally used for bibles and editions of the classics. This was done even though in early seventeenth century England drama was not regarded as high literature. The monumental gesture of the folio format had become possible because seven years earlier Ben Jonson had published his plays and poems in the same format. His contemporaries scoffed at

[7] In Germany, for example, monuments to Schiller became popular after 1859, his 100th birthday. They were erected to him as a liberal and patriotic poet, among other places in Weimar, Mannheim, Mainz, Frankfurt, Hannover, Salzburg, Marbach, Ludwigsburg, New York, Berlin, Vienna, and Munich.

how conceited he was. But whereas Jonson's front page shows various aspects of his work allegorically in an architectural structure, the portrait of Shakespeare on the title page is quite unusual, but entirely fitting for a monument.

The title-page is followed by a dedication, and a foreword by the editors, in which readers are encouraged to buy the book, but especially: "Reade him, Therefore, and again, and again" (Hinman 7)—re-reading, one is tempted to say, as a ritual of reverence.

After this, two poems praise Shakespeare and his works. The better known of the two is Ben Jonson's "To the memory of my beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare: And what he hath left us." In this poem, Jonson puts the edition in relation to the monuments of other authors that had already been erected in London's Westminster Abbey.

> Soul of the age!
> The applause, delight, the wonder of our stage!
> My Shakespeare, rise: I will not lodge thee by
> Chaucer or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lie
> A little further, to make thee a room;
> Thou art a monument without a tomb,
> And art alive still while thy book doth live,
> And we have wits to read, and praise to give. (Jonson 308).

Jonson mentions several ways of renewing Shakespeare's meaning: praising (*praise*), reading (*wits to read*) and, what is more difficult to understand: *while thy book doth live*, which most likely means: "as long as your plays are performed". *Book* is also the word for a theatre script, and *without a tomb* ("without a grave") can also be read as *without a tome*, i.e. "outside a printed volume."

The Folio then was conceived as a monument. Beyond this the Folio edition also gained monumental status because in the absence of Shakespeare manuscripts it came to be viewed as a kind of quasi-original and one of the most precious and most studied books. Earlier on, the relationship between the monument and a specific place was mentioned as one characteristic feature. With the Shakespeare First Folio, unlike with other books, even this seems to apply to a certain extent, considering the 82 copies held at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D. C.

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