

**The Missing Play:
From Cervantes to Shakespeare, an Historian Investigates**

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Despite its recent return to the stage, Cardenio’s play remains a literary ghost. In his latest book, Roger Chartier sheds light on this title without a text, tracing clues that lead from Cervantes to Shakespeare and from one genre to another. Along the way, he manages to date the birth of the Foucauldian author function.

Reviewed: Roger Chartier, *Cardenio entre Cervantès et Shakespeare. Histoire d’une pièce perdue*, Paris, Gallimard (“NRF essais”), 2011. 375 p., 15.90 €.

Some time ago, Roger Chartier transformed himself into the historian of two obsessions: on the one hand, the erasure of memory foretold by the disappearance of books, and, on the other, the troubling proliferation of text, which threatens to drown us in an aggressive sea of useless writing. One of his earlier books, *Inscrire et effacer*, offered an initial history of this paradoxical anxiety, which has been around much longer than the impatient historians of the digital revolution are inclined to believe. It was in this context that Chartier first encountered Cardenio¹. Well, not quite: while he had yet to discover Cardenio, he had stumbled upon the first clue that would lead to him. In chapter 23 of the first part of *Don Quixote*, Sancho Panza and his master arrive in the Sierra Morena. There they find an abandoned valise containing, in addition to some linen and a stash of gold coins, a *librillo de memoria*: a little book with coated pages, so that notes can be taken with a stylus and then erased. Later, in the next chapter, they meet the valise’s owner, a young Andalusian nobleman whose passion for love led him to retire to such austere surroundings. His name is Cardenio. They ask him to tell his story. His tale is a “lasting trace of the past, one that can be retrieved through a potentially painful quest,” while, to the contrary, the “kind of draft” that is the *librillo* represents memory: it is erasable, vulnerable, and ephemeral.

¹ Roger Chartier, “Écriture et mémoire. Le ‘librillo’ de Cardenio,” in *Inscrire et effacer. Culture écrite et littérature (XIe-XVIIIe siècle)*, Paris, Gallimard-Le Seuil (‘Hautes Études’), 2005, 33-52.

The Investigation: One Disappearance, Two Traces

This might have been a prologue. But Chartier's new book has little time for preamble. Almost immediately, the reader is plunged into the investigation. The book adopts the style and format of an investigation. It seeks to "penetrate the mystery" (p. 16 and p. 18) of a play, the text of which has disappeared.

"It was performed at the English court in the winter of 1612-1613. From what we can tell, its title was *Cardenio*" (p. 16). Thus ends the introduction, with a name as its only clue. The search for the lost text begins. It was no doubt *microstoria* (microhistory) that led historians to adopt the narrative form of an investigation. This form necessitates a particular kind of topic, or, at the very least, a specific approach: what does one investigate, if not murders and disappearances? Interestingly, in *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco incorporates these options into a single book: Aristotle's missing treaty on rhetoric, which had been believed to be lost, becomes the killer of its unsuspecting readers.

Two traces structure the investigation, at least in part one. These traces are textual, and Chartier lays them out at the opening of the first and fourth chapters. In the account ledger in which payments made by the English king's Treasurer of the Chamber were recorded, reference is made on July 9, 1613, to a salary paid to an actor belonging to the King's Men for a play "called Cardenia." This is the first trace. The second comes forty years later: on September 9, 1653, a bookseller by the name of Humphrey Moseley managed to register forty-one plays of which he claimed to be the sole proprietor with the Stationers' Company, an organization of London's printers. The list includes the following entry: "The History of Cardenio, by M. Fletcher & Shakespeare."

The problem has now been posed: a play bearing the name of a character in *Don Quixote* was performed before the king in 1613, and we learn in passing that in 1653, this play is attributed to Fletcher and Shakespeare. To solve this enigma, we must trace the way the text moves from one genre to another, from one language to another and, ultimately, from one author to another. The authors in question are, however, none other than Cervantes and Shakespeare, two of the sacred pinnacles of European culture. This is no doubt the bibliographical challenge that drove Chartier to undertake this quest, which required him to find his way through two stacks of critical commentaries, theoretical reflection, and fastidious scholarship.

Cardenio/Don Quichotte: the Novel, the Novella, and the Play

For the intrigue of which Cardenio is the hero to become available for theatrical appropriation, it had first to be extracted from its novelistic form. Cardenio's story is a kind of

novella with the novel. It concerns a sensitive and wild hidalgo. Like Don Quixote, he has spent too much time reading *Amadis of Gaul* and fifteenth-century novels of chivalry: the two knights are “brothers in reading and unreason” (p. 41). Love, betrayal, despair: the story of Cardenio’s thwarted love for the beautiful Luscinda, who has been promised to a fickle prince named Fernando who, in turn, abandoned for her a beautiful peasant named Dorotea, had clear dramatic potential. The story within the story, as Cardenio tells it to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, develops through fortuitous encounters in the Sierra Morena with the protagonists, who recall it and thus complete the narrative. A happy dénouement occurs when Dorotea intervenes directly into the main plot: by disguising herself as a princess who has been unjustly deprived of her kingdom by a cruel giant, she persuades Don Quixote to leave his Sierra Morena retreat and to return to the adventure as he sets out to find the land of Micromicon. All the characters then meet in an inn (except for Don Quixote, who is busy decapitating a giant), where forgiveness is exchanged and relationships restored: Luscinda finds her true husband, Cardenio, while Dorotea reconquers the heart of her Prince Fernando.

It is at this point that we must ask what Don Quixote’s role could have been in the play itself. The answer can only be indirect. Somewhat mischievously, Chartier tricks us, taking us down several dead-end streets. He first examines the comedy of the Valencian playwright Guillén de Castro, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, which was written between 1605 and 1608. In this play, Cardenio appears not as a nobleman’s son, but as a peasant. The dissymmetry of social conditions becomes a dramatic device for calling attention to Cardenio, with Don Quixote appearing only as the *gracioso*—a burlesque foil. The problem is not resolved, but simply restated: Chartier asks, “if Guillén’s *Don Quijote de la Mancha* is primarily the story of Cardenio, was the *Cardenio* played by the King’s Men also the story of Don Quixote?” (p. 83). In his effort to answer, Chartier considers a second diversion: *Les Folies de Cardenio* (The Follies of Cardenio), a tragi-comedy written by one Pichou, which was performed by the players of the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris in 1628. Here, it is Don Quixote and Sancho, rather than Cardenio, Luscinda, Fernanda, and Dorotea, who are at the center of the action. Chartier sees this as a “modulation in the theatrical appropriation of *Don Quixote*” (p. 114): previously, plays that brought scenes of the 1605 book to the French or English stage or to the Spanish *corrales* emphasized this sentimental tale that the novel’s protagonists stumbled upon. But Don Quixote and Sancho themselves are simply “comic foils in a plot that primarily focuses on the melancholy and angry Cardenio” (p. 114). Subsequently, however, comic parody of novels of chivalry became predominant.

Shakespeare: Two Authors in One

But how did Cervantès’ novel come to be known in England? This story is well known. Thomas Shelton’s translation of *Don Quixote* was published in 1612, at a time when the London stage abounded in references to Spain, which, politically, was a “threat that had to be dispelled”

(p. 23). It was, however, possible to be acquainted with Cervantès' work prior to the publication of the printed translation, either through direct access to the numerous Castilian editions that had appeared since 1605, or through the transmission of Shelton's translation in manuscript form. By 1605, it should be recalled, the novel had been through five editions and that, from very early on in Europe, "Don Quixote and his companions emerged from the pages of the book that recounted their adventures" (p. 61) in popular masquerades and courtly *divertissements*, such as the celebration in Valladolid on June 10, 1605 of a new heir to the throne, Prince Felipe, and two years later, in Pausa, the capital of Parinacochas province in Peru, the jousts celebrating Don Juan de Mendoza y Luna's appointment as viceroy. Indeed, by 1605, Castilian booksellers were sending entire crates of the book to their American correspondents. In this way, Chartier's book reads as an allusive but always insightful stroll through the vast bibliography devoted to the extraordinarily rapid and extensive diffusion of Cervantès' novel.

The same can be said of the Shakespearian library once Chartier turns to the thorny issue of attribution. He poses the problem in general terms, recalling that in the seventeenth century, the collaborative writing of plays was undoubtedly the norm: in his diary, the theatrical entrepreneur Philip Henslowe mentions 282 plays between 1590 and 1609, two thirds of which were composed by two authors or more. Yet during the same period, the records of the Stationers' Company identify only 15% to 18% of works as collaborative. This discrepancy is thus due to editorial choice, with printed editions attributing each play to one author on their title pages. We know of at least two plays (*Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*) that Fletcher wrote with Shakespeare. But the monumentalizing of Shakespeare's *oeuvre* with the "1623 folio," the first collection of plays attributed to him, "effaces collective theatrical practice while constructing a single author" (p. 120). If the authors of the "1623 folio" did have access to the *Cardenio* manuscript, they excluded it from their catalogue, no doubt because it did not belong to "the logic that built, in their variable dimensions, the works or the *oeuvre* of William Shakespeare." As the road comes to an end, "the mystery of this title without a text [remains] complete" (p. 155).

A coup de théâtre

By the beginning of the fifth chapter, Chartier has perfectly managed his coup de théâtre. "History would have left us there—and this book ended here—if in 1727 Lewis Theobald, one of Shakespeare's first three eighteenth-century editors, along with Nicholas Rowe and Alexander Pope, had not produced for the London stage at the Theater-Royal on Drury Lane a play entitled *Double Falshood, or the Distrest Lovers* » (p. 156). The play was presented as "Written Originally by W. Shakespeare; And now Revised and Adapted to the Stage By Mr. Theobald, the Author of *Shakespeare Restor'd*." The names have changed and there is no longer any allusion to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Could this be "the only surviving textual trace of the *Cardenio* played at the court?" (p. 157). In this preface, Theobald claims to own several manuscripts of a lost Shakespeare play, defends his scholarly approach, and claims to have scrupulously edited the text: in this way, he defends the authenticity of Shakespeare's "orphan play", which he refers

to as “his pen’s vestige” or “dear Relick.” Theobald turns Shakespeare into the incarnation of English taste and of a “British mind” which, as Chartier describes it, is characterized by “magnificently organized savagery” (p. 239). As editor, he seeks to “restore” corrupted texts, but as a dramaturge, he grants himself the freedom to completely rewrite plays. Chartier demonstrates that this apparent contradiction expresses a broader tension: Shakespeare has become a classic that one must read in “texts as authentic as those of the ancients,” but he must also be adjusted to contemporary taste, new theatrical practices, and political realities” (p. 173).

The royal privilege was granted in 1727, which would seem to give credit to its authenticity as a Shakespearian work. Yet Theobald’s preface, which is full of denials, betrays the very incredulity that it purports to contest. Why was this play lost? Why was it never performed? Does it hew more closely to Fletcher’s manner and style? These doubts were presumably serious, as the *Double Falsehood* was never included in Jacob Tonson’s 1733 edition of Shakespeare’s *Works*. The 1728 performance was indeed a “royal miracle”: a rediscovery of a Shakespearian relic. True, some of the spectators who attended the premier of the *Double Falsehood* on December 13, 1727 may have had prior images of the plot and its character in their heads as they watched it. To reconstruct these possible memories, Chartier devotes a chapter to the engravings and prints found in the printed English editions of *Don Quixote*, as well as to other stage adaptations that made England “quixotic” (we also learn, in passing, that this wonderful neologism was first used in 1718). In short, “the spectators of the Royal Theater had been prepared to see a Shakespeare play that no one had ever seen” (p. 238). Even so, the authenticity of play Theobald had recovered met with increasing skepticism over the eighteenth century. Twentieth-century literary criticism inherited this uncertainty.

Waiting for Foucault

In reviewing Chartier’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in these pages (but does a website have pages? This is a chartieresque question *par excellence*), [Christian Jouhaud](#) suggested that Chartier’s methodology, like Pierre Bourdieu’s in *Leçon sur la leçon* (“Lesson on Lessons”), should be reflectively applied to him. In other words, the meaning of his text should be analyzed by considering its material format, its audience, and its shifts between oral to written forms². We could play the same game, analyzing the *Cardenio* by examining the “textual traces” found in its index, such as this deceptively innocuous entry: “Foucault, Michel: 283-285, 285, 297 n. 21, 349 n. 48.” After a certain amount of (false) theoretical suspense, the author of “What is an Author?” only makes his appearance at the very end of the book, in the epilogue’s final paragraph. It is uncharacteristic of Chartier to postpone a presentation of his theoretical concerns by discussing the authors who had previously dealt with them—nor is it the usual writing practice of historians, whom Chartier accustomed to this habit. This is undoubtedly what makes this book so uniquely charming: it leaves it to the narrative

² Christian Jouhaud, "[La couleur des morts.](#)" *La Vie des idées*, June 9, 2008.

movement that creates the intrigue to clinch the argument. In this way, Chartier has written an historical essay that is in many respects experimental.

The theoretical stakes of Chartier's essay are considerable: his goal is to show that the Foucauldian author function only achieved its "final form" in the eighteenth century, with the consecration of the author, the fetichization of the hand-written manuscript, and literary copyright. This assertion will undoubtedly provoke debate, particularly among Medievalists, who will not necessarily agree with it. In his famous 1969 lecture, Foucault did not really attempt to date the emergence of the author function, which he saw as a paradigm more than an historical fact. Commenting on this complex text, Chartier has emphasized the fact that the system of private appropriation that characterizes copyright law does indeed constitute a first chronological turning point, one "which has often been noted by commentators," but that others exist as well. Some date back to the fourteenth century: analysis of the manuscript tradition of Petrarch's *Trionfi*, in which it is the author rather than his works that are individualized, suggest that "the progress of the author-function in book identification" was already underway³.

The epilogue, where the Foucauldian influence that haunts the book is finally unveiled, is devoted to the most recent fluctuations in the remembering of *Cardenio*, the missing play that, for the past fifteen years, has been constantly performed. In this instance, too, Chartier's narrative choice is all the more remarkable, given how commonplace it has become in historical writing to consider objects from the standpoint of their most immediately visible memorial outcroppings. The English-speaking world has been hit by "*Cardenio* fever," which has introduced the broader public to what had hitherto been a minor scholarly enigma. The most recent production, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company from April to October 2011 for the reopening of Stratford-upon-Avon's Swan Theater, mixed Cervantes' original text with Shelton's translation and Theobald's adaptation. Some claim to have found the seventeenth-century text lurking behind the eighteenth-century rewriting, while others have proposed contemporary reinterpretations of it. More dubious are semi-scholarly efforts to reattribute existing plays. But the profusion of textual experiments that seek to embody this literary ghost—"this text which is forever absent yet which has been so frequently saved from oblivion" (241)—only validates the perceptiveness of the problem Chartier has posed, namely, the discrepancy between the mobility of texts and the stability of authorial names.

In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Chartier announced that he would devote himself to a "rather Borgesian" study. This unquestionably describes *Cardenio*, and is the reason why the book's opening pages offer neither a theoretical discussion of the Foucauldian author function, nor the story of the ways in which the lost play has recently been reinvented, but present, rather, literary efforts to express the tension between the anxiety of loss and the danger of suffocation—the tension which, as we noted at the outset, has been the obsessive focus of his

³ Roger Chartier, "Figures de l'auteur," in *Culture écrite et société. L'ordre des livres (XIVe-XVIIIe siècle)*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1996, 45-80 (quotes 49 and 71).

research. How can one “make works exist that were never written” (p. 11)? Answers can be found in contemporary literature that has been inspired by Borges. Chartier cites the novels of Roberto Bolaño and Ricardo Piglia. Borges “took action” by choosing “to write texts without existence, attributed to real writers who could have written them or authors who were as imaginary as their work” (p. 13). Historians are unable to “take action” in this way: they would be putting their literary imagination to very poor use if they aspired to write the texts that they lacked. Historians are expected not to fill in empty spaces, but to closely circumscribe them, in particular by attempting to understand why we miss missing texts and who really misses them the most. There was a moment in the eighteenth century when the disappearance of *Cardenio* created an “intolerable absence” (281), and only at this point can we truly say that the text had disappeared. Herein lies the force of this “history of a lost play”: it is, more than anything, a history of the sense of loss.

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