

Epilogue

As a summary of the action of *The Merchant of Venice*, the reading proposed by the original title page is doubtless perverse, but it may serve as an appropriately emblematic conclusion to this investigation, in that it so neatly exemplifies the utter dependency of text on interpretation, and accurately foretells the complex and divided history of performance. Increasingly strenuous attempts by playwrights to control the interpretation of their plays, from Jonson's interventionist commentators and printed critical prefaces, to Shaw's novelistic stage directions and disquisitions on what the characters feel, to Genet's, Beckett's, and Arthur Miller's refusal, at times litigious, to allow productions of their plays they deemed unorthodox, only confirm the stubborn independence of the script. By the end of the seventeenth century and until late in the nineteenth, the author was often incorporated into the performing tradition by being made responsible for rehearsals, in effect becoming the director; but even so, it was a rare play that emerged in performance as it had been delivered from the author's pen or appeared in print, and it was a much rarer revival of a play remaining in the repertory that truly replicated the original. The imitation of life is as changeable as life itself.

It is also as transitory. One of the greatest problems of theater history is to see with the eyes of the past. The problem is not only in changing notions of representation—Garrick's pneumatic wig in *Hamlet* derives not from any observation of human behavior, but from a psychology still firmly rooted in mechanistic physiology—but even more in the tendency of history itself to seek explanations in the general rather than the particular, to distrust the individual and exceptional. What audiences want is never a constant, and is determinable by actors, directors and producers, moreover, only through trial and error, and largely in hindsight; and this is true in great measure because the very notion of the audience as a unit with definable tastes and responses is suspect. People have always gone to the theater for the widest variety of reasons, many of which have nothing to do with whatever play happens to be on the stage. Plato decried the immorality of actors and the dishonesty and irrationality of fictions, but for moralists, these have always paled into insignificance beside the infinite and uncontrollable desires of spectators. Having begun with scripts and performers, here is where we must conclude: the essence of drama, the theater's life and soul, is finally the audience.