

# PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE

*Oliver Ford Davies*

Foreword by Stanley Wells



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# I

## THE ELIZABETHAN ACTOR

An actor's art can die, and live to act a second part.

*1623 folio*

**W**hy bother with what actors did four hundred years ago? If you feel this strongly, skip this chapter, but I think you will be missing a valuable source of help. Shakespeare was an acting member of a permanent company – unlike, say, Congreve, Wilde or Stoppard – and wrote for a particular theatre, audience and group of actors. Hard evidence is scanty, but there are signs that he tailored his plays to suit his chosen stages and company of actors. To have some knowledge of the Elizabethan stage must be a help in understanding how to interpret and perform the plays.

### THE ROOTS OF ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

The tradition of acting in plays went back many centuries, and by the sixteenth century took several forms. There were various kinds of religious plays – morality plays, saint plays and biblical plays – promoted by towns and parishes and performed by local amateurs, sometimes supplemented by travelling actors we might call semi-professional. The most ambitious of these were the mystery cycles, presented by the great civic authorities, often with elaborate stage effects. But Catholic doctrine was inevitably an integral part of these scripts, and so they increasingly fell foul of both the state and local Protestant authorities. The last York cycle was performed in 1575, the Coventry cycle in 1579, and in 1581 the government prohibited them altogether. The morality tradition lived on, however, and can be seen in Marlowe's Good and Bad Angels in *Dr Faustus*, and in Shakespeare's Father and Son who flank Henry VI after the Battle of Towton.

There was a strong tradition of touring players, entertainers and minstrels – would-be professionals who could turn their hands to other things when times were hard. Civic authorities also funded plays and entertainments, either based on local figures such as Robin Hood or to celebrate the various Christian festivities. Schools and universities were active in promoting drama, because public speaking and the art of rhetoric were fundamental to Tudor education. There was a tradition of boy choristers performing at court and in aristocratic households, often in large-cast plays with music that had religious or political agendas. In 1576 the Chapel Children moved to a theatre in Blackfriars and were the predecessors of Hamlet's 'eyrie of children, little eyases', strong competition for the adult companies. Finally there were acting companies attached to the court and aristocratic households. Encouraged by Henrys VII and VIII a new theatrical tradition emerged after 1500, rooted in the emerging tide of humanism. These 'interludes' were classically inspired allegories like John Skelton's *Magnificence* (1515–18) or romantic comedies such as Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister* (1530?). They contained characters, themes, and an emphasis on internal moral struggle that greatly influenced Elizabethan playwrights. These early Tudor household players were at first part-timers, with other household and musical duties. Gradually they formed more independent groups, touring a great deal, but always under the umbrella of aristocratic patronage. This patronage enabled them to travel unhindered by the Elizabethan proclamations against wandering vagabonds, as well as giving them some protection at court and in government; in return their patron gained both prestige and entertainment at his various feasts and gatherings. In the 1570s and 1580s there were about a dozen such troupes. By 1594, as a result of amalgamations, the main permanent troupes were the Lord Chamberlain's Men based at the Theatre in Shoreditch, the Lord Admiral's Men at the Rose in Southwark, and the Queen's Men formed in 1583 to tour and make court appearances.<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare therefore could have become hooked on theatre from many different sources. He would have studied rhetoric and acted in plays at the King's New School in Stratford. He would have seen the many touring companies which his father, as town bailiff in 1569, had to license as well as attending the

first performance. He could have seen the entertainments at the Queen's visit to nearby Kenilworth in 1575, and he might even have seen the last Coventry mystery cycle when he was fifteen. If he was the 'William Shakeshafte', who was working in 1581 as a tutor in Lancashire, he would have come into contact with Lord Strange's acting company when they toured there, and that might have given him the patronage that took him to London some time after 1585 (when his last, twin children were born) and propelled him into acting and writing at both the Theatre and the Rose by 1590. There is some speculation that he may have joined the Queen's Men when they visited Stratford in 1587, shortly after the murder of one of their players, William Knell. His acting skills could therefore have been honed at school, in local festivities, and through a connection with one of the touring companies. All this is conjecture . . . but at the same time, Shakespeare's extraordinary theatrical talent must have been nurtured *somewhere*.

### THE ACTORS

We have the names of nearly a thousand actors between 1560 and 1640. Where did they all come from? Some were entertainers – minstrels, jugglers, tumblers like Richard Tarlton – or comedians and dancers of jigs, like Will Kemp who played Dogberry and was probably the first Falstaff. Some actors were tradesmen, from goldsmiths to butchers, who abandoned the professions their fathers had carved out for them. Theatrical dynasties were already being established. Richard Burbage (1568–1619), Shakespeare's star actor, followed his father on to the stage and was acclaimed by the age of sixteen. The female parts were played by boys, who were usually apprenticed from the age of ten upwards to an individual player and maintained by him. John Heminges apprenticed ten such through his long career. In their late teens, when they could no longer speak in a convincingly high register, they might graduate to male parts (see pp. 20–1). Then there must have been those who simply hung around the theatres doing odd jobs, hoping to worm their way into playing. If Shakespeare arrived from Stratford with no professional experience he may have been among those hopefuls (one tradition has him holding horses for visiting gentry).<sup>2</sup>

## SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

The life of the plays is in the language.

*Richard Eyre*

## INTRODUCTION

All we have of Shakespeare the dramatist are the playtexts. For all the educated guesses we don't know for sure when or where he wrote the plays, how long they took him, how much they were revised, and above all we have not a line to show what he thought of any of this. Ben Jonson wrote that Shakespeare 'flowed with that facility, that sometime it was necessary he should be stopped',<sup>1</sup> but there is some contrary evidence that he experimented with many different versions of a speech and that he was a great reviser and reworker of material. We don't know whether the texts that have come down to us are accurate representations of what he wrote or what his company performed. Are there missing scenes in *Macbeth*? Would he prefer us to play the quarto or the folio version of *King Lear*? We don't know whether a plot was chosen because it reflected something in Shakespeare's own life or in contemporary society. Did he want to impress James I, or keep Burbage happy? Was he affected by the 1608 corn riots? Was he suffering from syphilis? The absence of firm answers might seem like a catalogue of obstacles. In fact I find it a huge release. All we have are the words. We are free.

Well, not quite free. Shakespeare's language is a great enabler. But it is also at times a problem. A little help is needed to overcome this. First, and most obviously, the language is sometimes archaic, and occasionally impenetrable. Words like 'biggin', 'fardel', 'jennet', 'mobled', 'skirr', and 'wappered' have to be translated. Goneril's 'May all the building on my fancy pluck / Upon my hateful life', or Coriolanus' 'They are no less / When,



both your voices blended, the great'st taste / Most palates theirs' are almost impossible to decipher. Good footnotes are a vital aid.

Second, some words have changed their meaning. Though Polonius' and Hamlet's 'What's the matter?' often gets a laugh today, Shakespeare meant by 'matter' something being read or discussed. There's nothing to be done about this, just accept the laugh (gratefully). Some slight changes of usage are deeply frustrating to the actor. 'Anon' and 'presently' both meant 'at once' not 'soon'. When Kent is trying to take Lear out of the storm, Lear repulses him with 'When the mind's free / The body's delicate'. I longed to say 'sensitive' rather than 'delicate', to make the meaning more obvious. Modern productions (particularly on film) do sometimes change a few words. In decades to come, since language is changing more rapidly than ever before, substitutions may become the norm.

Third, and most commonly, the language can be multi-layered, overblown or compact to a point where it can seem difficult and remote. Shakespeare at times seems almost perversely to obscure his meaning, to hold things back, to raise questions that he's not prepared to answer. Leontes' unbalanced mental state causes him to skip almost unintelligibly from thought to thought in this wonderful passage:

Ha' not you seen, Camillo –  
 But that's past doubt; you have, or your eye-glass  
 Is thicker than a cuckold's horn – or heard –  
 For, to a vision so apparent, rumour  
 Cannot be mute – or thought – for cogitation  
 Resides not in that man that does not think –  
 My wife is slippery? If thou wilt confess –  
 Or else be impudently negative  
 To have nor eyes, nor ears, nor thought – then say  
 My wife's a hobby-horse. . .

*(The Winter's Tale, 1.2.269–278)*

Shakespeare can also be terse to the point of obscurity. Macbeth ends his disastrous dinner party with the lines:

Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse  
 Is the initiate fear that wants hard use.  
 We are yet but young in deed. (3.4.141–3)

To be immediately understood today we would need to say: ‘My strange self-delusion is the fear of the novice that lacks experience’. The terrible implications of those final seven syllables (there is no attempt at a verse line) are enormous, but you need to understand that ‘deed’ implies enterprise, or even murder.

Such obscurities can be serious problems, but take heart on two counts. First, it isn’t just our generation that is puzzled: Elizabethan audiences must have found such writing difficult. Compared with nearly all his contemporaries Shakespeare took language on a gargantuan spree. John Heminges and Henry Condell, his two actor colleagues who compiled the First Folio in 1623, seemed aware of this in their introduction. They ask their readers:

We hope . . . you will find enough both to draw and hold you . . . Read him therefore; and again and again: and if then you do not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger not to understand him.<sup>2</sup>

Even allowing for the fact they had an expensive book to sell, this reads as a heartfelt and uneasy plea. They had been acting in his plays for nearly thirty years, and presumably knew the popular ones backwards. They know they can be difficult, that they will require several readings, and if you are not held and engaged you won’t understand him.

The second reason to feel confident is that Shakespeare wrote his plays to be heard, not read. He seems to have paid little attention during his lifetime to the publication of his plays in single quarto form and, since the First Folio was not published until seven years after his death, putting his collected plays in order was hardly the preoccupation of his final years. Without Heminges and Condell’s perseverance eighteen of his plays would almost certainly have been lost, including *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*. Shakespeare wrote for an audience over half of whom were probably illiterate. Everyone was used to listening to stories and music from their earliest childhood. At school they learnt largely by rote, reciting and repeating information aurally. They developed their ability to listen and distinguish sounds to an acute pitch we have almost entirely lost today, obsessed as we are by the visual. Puns,

antitheses, and plays-on-words were meat and drink to an Elizabethan audience, and the stage was where they heard words being most richly and eloquently used. Writers could afford to be wayward about punctuation and spelling, even where their own names were concerned (there were dozens of different spellings of 'Shakespeare'), because listening was everything, and the *sound* of words communicates at a deeper level than simple meaning – a theme we shall constantly return to. Viola's line 'How will this fadge?' may look difficult to us on the page: in the theatre it seems to be readily understood. I have been amazed how much foreign audiences, with only a partial knowledge of English, understand quite sophisticated wordplay simply by listening.

The actor's first job is of course to understand what is being said. For this we need the help of a text with good footnotes and glossary. This in turn should lead to an understanding of the more crucial question: what is the character thinking? The indications in Shakespeare's language as to rhythm, stress, intonation, pace and pauses will help us to a greater and subtler realisation of both meaning and emotion. Thought, feeling, and response to language exist as an organic whole. We can't regulate the process by prioritising one over the other. Everyone starts with the text, but some will respond first to meaning, others to sound and shape. But the final intention is the same – to be clear about what Shakespeare, and in turn your character, is doing. Once we are clear, then there's a good chance the audience will understand and appreciate a passage which might defeat them when read.

### VERSE

The sight of *VERSE* on a page can be daunting, and might suggest that everyone speaks in the same formal idiom. But as soon as we start speaking the verse out loud, even if there are passages we don't understand, it comes to life. Individual character immediately starts to emerge. As the poet Seamus Heaney says, 'What was hypnotic read aloud had been perplexing when sight-read for meaning only.' Granville Barker memorably said that in one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, *Romeo and Juliet*, he had already solved 'at a stroke all the essential problems of the

dramatic use of blank verse'.<sup>3</sup> He could easily have written Juliet's homely, chattering nurse in prose (and it's printed as such in both quartos and folio), but in fact it's in fairly regular verse:

Even or odd, of all days in the year  
 Come Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen.  
 Susan and she – God rest all Christian souls! –  
 Were of an age. Well, Susan is with God;  
 She was too good for me. But, as I said,  
 On Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen,  
 That shall she, marry, I remember it well.  
 'Tis since the earthquake now eleven years,  
 And she was weaned – I never shall forget it –  
 Of all the days of the year upon that day,  
 For I had then laid wormwood to my dug.  
 Sitting in the sun under the dovehouse wall.  
 My lord and you were then at Mantua.  
 Nay, I do bear a brain! But, as I said,  
 When it did taste the wormwood on the nipple  
 Of my dug and felt it bitter, pretty fool,  
 To see it tetchy and fall out wi'th' dug! (1.3.18–34)

This is a bravura display of reproducing the fits and starts of colloquial speech. It also contrasts with the verse of the other two women in the scene. Lady Capulet's language has a consciously wrought formality and is rich in metaphor and rhyme:

Read o'er the volume of young Paris' face,  
 And find delight writ there with beauty's pen.  
 Examine every married lineament,  
 And see how one another lends content;  
 And what obscured in this fair volume lies  
 Find written in the margin of his eyes. (1.3.83–8)

Juliet also uses metaphor, rhyme and alliteration, but her speech has the simple, dutiful gravity of a teenage daughter:

I'll look to like, if looking liking move;  
 But no more deep will I endart mine eye  
 Than your consent gives strength to make it fly.  
 (1.3.99–101)

From quite early in his career Shakespeare understood how to make verse work for him and help to individualise character.