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Shakespeare & the Actor

LOIS POTTER

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To Robert Crighton and the Beyond Shakespeare group, whose Zoom playreadings have been one of my greatest pleasures in lockdown and after:

1 QUEEN To thee no star be dark!
2 QUEEN Both heaven and earth
Friend thee forever!
3 QUEEN All the good that may
Be wished upon thy head, I cry 'Amen'to't!

(Fletcher and Shakespeare, *The Two Noble Kinsmen,* 1.4.1–3)

Preface

Shakespeare and the Actor is a study of what the dramatist and the actor owe to each other. It is not a history of Shakespearian acting, still less of *great* acting: many actors who are barely mentioned here would have to figure much more extensively in such a book.

I have taken most of my examples from productions that I saw myself. Nothing can substitute for the experience of seeing a play: reviews are notoriously inadequate and often inaccurate. Though I have tried to give broad coverage, my focus is on British and to a lesser extent American theatre, because this is where I have first-hand experience. That experience largely begins just after 1960, when the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon and the National Theatre (both later to be designated 'Royal') set out to create companies with a distinctive style, initially for the purpose of performing Shakespeare and other classic drama. The book's ending point, inevitably, is March 2020, when theatres were closed because of the Covid pandemic. As I write, there are conflicting views as to what should happen next. Some want to see the theatre reopen exactly as it used to be; others, as my last chapter will show, argue that it cannot, and should not, ever be the same again.

When I started work on this book, it became apparent that there is an enormous amount of available material on established Shakespearian actors. I have supplemented this with the views of actors from various stages of their careers, in an attempt to indicate the range of people who are involved with performing the plays today. Those from whom I have quoted on the basis either of their answers to a questionnaire or of a personal interview are Lynsey Beauchamp, Sarah Blake, Andy Cryer, Darren Freebury-Jones, Margot Leicester, Sally McLean, Tyler Nowakowski, Joe Penczak, Barrie Rutter, René Thornton, Jr, and Jeffrey Weissman. Extracts from their responses, in the chapters that follow, will not be footnoted.

Throughout, I use the word 'actress' rather than 'female actor', since it is used by many women in the profession and I see no evidence that anyone finds it insulting.

Shakespeare quotations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

Acknowledgements

Stanley Wells and Peter Holland first suggested that I write a book on Shakespeare and actors and have commented helpfully on various stages of its development, as has, more recently, Lena Orlin. Lena also invited me, years ago, to teach an NEH seminar on 'Teaching Shakespeare through performance' at the Folger Shakespeare Library, where I learned a great deal from some superb theatre practitioners, especially Audrey Stanley and Kurt Daw. Lyn Tribble was also a member of that seminar, and I have benefitted from her work on cognition in the theatre. Much of what I know about theatre practice comes from watching rehearsals and performances of productions by Roger Warren and Robert Kenny at the University of Leicester and those of the Professional Theatre Training Program at the University of Delaware, which, under director Sandy Robbins, has produced some of America's best stage actors. The experience of visiting and teaching at the Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton, Virginia, and Shakespeare's Globe in London has also been invaluable, thanks to their splendid theatre practitioners: Ralph Allen Cohen, Patrick Spottiswood, and James Wallace.

I owe special thanks to my pandemic 'support bubble', Cindy Sughrue and George Thomson. As the only people I was allowed to see in person for months on end, they provided not only morale-raising company but a combined practical expertise that sustained my day-to-day existence. I have been lucky in having an all-consuming book project to work on during this period of enforced isolation, and I am grateful to my contacts on email and Zoom: Eric Collum, Darlene Farabee, Becky Jaroff, Laurence Normand, Christine Poulson, Angela Smallwood, Trish Thomas, and Michèle Willems (and friends who still prefer the telephone: Richard and Christine Foulkesand Janet Payne), for putting up with my progress reports. Lindsay Duguid and John Murray Brown went for walks with me and gave me good advice,, as did Reiko Takeda and John Lavagnino. My friend and former student, the fine actress Margot Leicester, not only wrote eloquent answers to my questions on zoom but answered more

questions in person when we were finally able to go for a walk in the park.

Much earlier versions of the first and sixth chapters were given (as the London Shakespeare Lecture in honour of Professor Stanley Wells) at Notre Dame's London campus in March 2016 and at the Société Française Shakespeare in Paris, January 2020; otherwise, this book was largely researched and written while libraries and theatres were closed. During that period, I was very grateful for the online resources of the London Library and, at a later stage, I appreciated its evident concern to make Covid-safe research as pleasant as possible. At an even later stage, I also benefitted from the Performing Arts section of the Barbican Library.

My experience of theatre has been largely vicarious, as a spectator and enthusiastic playreader, so I've been fortunate in that the lockdown has produced so many Zoom reading groups. Martin Wiggins' 'Reading Early Plays' group, based at the Shakespeare Institute, is a model of how reading aloud can be used for a scholarly purpose, and I wish that I'd had the time to attend the entire 'King's Men' sequence. Robert Crighton, the indefatigable head of Beyond Shakespeare, has devoted the last few years to championing the pre-1642 non-Shakespearean drama in podcasts and Zoom readings (all of which are recorded and, as I write, visible on YouTube). As he casts his volunteers at random, I have had the opportunity to play some wonderful roles in a group combining amateurs and professionals, who, through our virtual contact, have given me insight into the varied careers of those trained in the profession. The one playwright we never read is Shakespeare, and, because he would inevitably dominate discussion, we are not supposed to quote or refer to him during our sessions. For that reason, Beyond Shakespeare will not figure in this book, but I have made amends in my dedication, and I am glad to have found a quotation from a play that is only partly by the author in my title.

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The Idea of the Shakespearian Actor

Shakespearian acting is one kind of classical acting, meaning the acting of plays that have become classics by surviving the original circumstances of their production, usually through the quality of their writing. Perhaps there is no more to be said. Indeed, Michael Pennington has commented that the term 'Shakespearian actor' 'sounds like something out of the nineteenth century'[1] and Stanley Wells suggests that 'It is not always easy—possibly it is not even necessary—to distinguish between great Shakespeare actors and great actors who have played Shakespeare.'[2] Yet the existence of—for example—the six volumes called *Players of Shakespeare*, as well as *The Routledge Companion to Actors' Shakespeare,* and Wells's own *Great Shakespeare Actors: Burbage to Branagh*, is based on the belief that there is some reason for looking at actors specifically in their relationship to Shakespeare, and the history of Shakespearian acting is also the history of the English-speaking professional theatre.

The members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later, the King's Men) were not Shakespearian actors; they were performing contemporary drama. But the sense that author and actor were interdependent is already present in the anonymous 1619 elegy on Richard Burbage: 'He's gone, and with him, what a world are dead!' This poet was of course writing before the publication of the 1623 Folio, which, by including eighteen plays not previously published, made more of that world accessible on the page. The Folio was, however, an expensive volume and, for most people, Shakespeare's characters continued to exist only in the theatre. That a playwright needs an actor as much as

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an actor needs a playwright is still the view of the epilogue that Charles Gildon wrote for Betterton's benefit in 1709, where Shakespeare is made to ask despairingly, 'Why did I only write what only he could Play?' Writing of Betterton, thirty years later, Colley Cibber made the same point: author and actor were 'Form'd for the mutual Assistance, and Illustration of each others Genius!'[3]

The roles that supposedly died with Burbage in 1619 were all tragic, and mainly Shakespearian: Hamlet, Othello, Lear (from the only Jacobean play), and Hieronimo in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Burbage had played in comedy as well (he was Ben Jonson's original Volpone), but the elegist is interested in him only as a tragic actor. At the Restoration, the sense that Shakespeare belonged primarily to the actors, and especially to the leading tragic actor, was enhanced by the rapidity with which Betterton rose to become the leading performer of his day. Already in 1661 Pepys says that he and his wife agreed that he was the best actor in the world and the diary not only records praise for his Hamlet on two further occasions, but in 1668 also calls it 'the best part I believe that ever man acted.'[4] Pepys may mean simply that Betterton was giving the best performance of any role that he ever saw, but perhaps he had realized that a great actor needs a great role as much as a great role needs a great actor. The Restoration seems not to have felt that Shakespeare's plays required a different style of acting from contemporary plays. If anything, there was more nervousness about acting Jonson, who was known to have drilled his actors meticulously, 'Line by line, each Tittle, Accent, Word'; now, a contemporary prologue lamented, 'all Tradition, and like Helps, are lost.'[5] Shakespeare's plays aroused no such anxiety.

The Tragic Actor

This book will not be exclusively about male actors, or tragic actors, but these are the categories to which the term 'Shakespearian actor' usually refers. From Aristotle onward, tragedy had been the supreme dramatic genre and the playing of high-status tragic characters conferred similar status on an actor. There is some evidence that, in his Jacobean period, Shakespeare was being seen, perhaps by his own choice, as primarily a 'tragedian'. As Tiffany Stern points out, this word could mean both a writer of tragedies and a performer of them.

Shakespeare 'was said to combine the two: when he is praised for his "tragic" skills, it is not even always clear whether his writing or acting is being extolled'.[6] In an epigram published in 1610, John Davies assured Shakespeare that 'Had'st thou not played some Kingly parts in sport / Thou hadst bin a companion for a *King*....' Like every piece of evidence about the historical Shakespeare, these lines have been analysed microscopically. They may simply be a compliment to the actor's good character and bearing, but they could also be taken to mean that he was best known for dignified roles, especially at a time when he had largely retired from acting and may have wanted to be seen as a gentleman.

The dominance of the tragic actor is as unfair as all autocracies are. We know that the leading clown was the most popular and important member of early theatre companies, that many actors consider it harder to play comedy than tragedy, and that many of the roles in Shakespeare's comedies and histories demand acting of at least as high a level as those in the tragedies—and yet the leading tragedian was nearly always the head of the post-Restoration troupe. Betterton also played comic characters, including Falstaff, but he is described in Gildon's *Life* as 'the last of our tragedians'. Colley Cibber, writing in 1740 of the Betterton he remembered from the 1690s, described him purely as an actor of Shakespearian tragedy, never equalled in the roles of Othello, Hamlet, Hotspur, Macbeth, and Brutus. After 1660 Shakespeare's comedies suffered far more than his tragedies from the passage of time and changing theatrical conditions. Their humour and satire had dated; they offered too few opportunities for the kind of acting that audiences wanted to see from actresses; the critical view of comedy had no place for their frequent exploitation of magical and improbable events derived from the romance tradition. Gildon in fact argued that Shakespeare had written only one real comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor.* Another reason for their comparative neglect was of course the fact that they demand ensemble playing and are not centred on a male character. Even in *The Merry Wives,* Falstaff's dominance is the result of the aura he brings with him from the *Henry IV* plays.

Cibber's descriptions in the *Apology* of what he considered to be great acting are beautifully detailed and convincing, the work of a careful observer who in the early part of his career had sometimes given a performance in imitation of, and homage to, another actor. He

included delightful accounts of performances by actresses in comedy—but not in Shakespeare. Like the *Apology*, the history of Shakespearian acting has essentially been the history of major actors in starring roles, with occasional glimpses of minor characters, especially in the comedies, who were given special prominence by a gifted performer. This history has also involved competition and comparison. Cibber's account of what Betterton did at the first sight of the Ghost became his touchstone for other Hamlets and led later writers to focus on that moment. The desire to compare and rank may always have been part of spectatorship: John Marston's verses on a stage-struck Elizabethan spectator, published in 1598, suggest that the way to get him talking is to ask, 'Say who acts best, Drusus or Roscio?'[7] Though in 1660 Shakespeare's plays had been divided between the two licensed theatres, the arrangement lapsed when the two were amalgamated between 1682 and 1695, and it therefore became possible for the two companies to offer rival performances of the same role.

One might expect to see the concept of the Shakespearian actor embodied in David Garrick, the greatest theatrical phenomenon of the eighteenth century. Praising him, Francis Gentleman echoes what Gildon and Cibber had already said about Betterton: Shakespeare 'never reached the zenith of his glory till the inimitable Actor had studied and illustrated him.'[8] But, like Shakespeare, Garrick was an actor-playwright, and, despite his stated wish to 'lose no drop of that immortal man', he frequently rewrote the immortal man. The fact that he was equally brilliant in both tragedy and comedy ensured that he was seen less as a Shakespearian (tragic) actor than as a co-creator: 'A Dramatic Genius, formed upon the same plan as was that of our immortal Shakespeare,' as one contemporary put it.[9] Michael Dobson mentions—and sees 'nothing to refute'—the contemporary accusation that Roubiliac's statue of Shakespeare was really an image of Garrick.[10] The sense that an actor speaking Shakespeare's words is to some extent 'channelling' the playwright is not one that anyone would have expressed in this period but it may lie behind some of the veneration of Garrick.

Even before Garrick took over the management of Drury Lane in 1747, Shakespeare's plays had started to dominate the London stage and the actor's repertoire. One reason was the Licensing Act of 1737: any play written after that date had to be licensed by the Lord