2011 SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

Audience–Actor Boundaries and *Othello*

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WHILE HE WAS a student at the Middle Temple, John Manningham kept a diary that covers the year(s) 1602–3. Part diary, part commonplacebook, his compilation from London life includes the following anecdote:

> Upon a tyme when Burbidge played Richard III. there was a citizen grone soe farr in liking with him, that before shee went from the play shee appointed him to come that night unto hir by the name of Richard the Third. Shakespeare overhearing their conclusion went before, was intertained and at his game ere Burbidge came. Then message being brought that Richard the Third was at the dore, Shakespeare caused returne to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third.[1]

The story is famous for its onomastic joke (obligingly underlined by Manningham's concluding explanation: 'Shakespeare's name, William') and its comic sexual punch line. But the anecdote also raises questions about the boundaries between audience and actor, between the world of fiction and the real world, and between actor and character. Simply put, the question is: who was the object of the citizen's amorous attention—Burbage? Richard the Third? or Burbage-as-Richard-the-Third?

This anecdote (whether true or apocryphal) thus cues three investigations. The first is the issue of audience response to, and interaction with, the plays they saw. The architecture of the proscenium stage invites actors to pretend that there is no audience. Joe Orton's *Loot* registers this absurdity when one character urges that a secret 'go no farther than these three

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[1] *Diary of John Manningham*, ed. John Bruce (London, 1886), p. 39.

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walls'.[2] But, as we see in the recurrent metatheatrical sophistication that typifies drama from Tudor private theatricals such as Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucres* to the plays-within-plays of the early modern professional theatre, in drama written for a playing space in which audiences are proximate, it is folly to ignore them. So this lecture is partly about the relation between plays and audiences and the figure who mediates between them: the actor.

One of the things actors do—in fact, the single most important thing they do—at least, in realist drama—is portray character. As a category of analysis, 'character' has fallen from favour in recent decades, but it has never gone away for actors who perform Shakespeare plays or for audiences who watch them. So this lecture explores what character might have meant to Shakespeare.

The link between these two topics (audiences and characters) is the concept of gaps and boundaries: the gap between fictional characters and the actors who portray them; the boundary between play and audience. The final section of this lecture deals with the Shakespeare play that is most interested in gaps, in actors and audiences—*Othello*, which takes the subject of theatre boundaries and turns it into plot.

I Audiences

Elizabethan playwrights were at the mercy of their audiences. In a repertory system which had no long runs—twelve performances in a year was a major success[3]—the audience's reaction was the sole factor determining whether a play had a second performance or never saw the light of day again. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents an extreme case. Bottom and his comrades are worried about the audience misinterpreting the lion as a real lion: 'that were enough to hang us all'; 'that would hang us, every mother's son'.[4] The criminal punishment envisaged is apt because, in a sense, audiences were jurors[5] and the language of the law courts is frequent in prologues and epilogues. The Chorus in *Henry 5* asks us 'gently

[2] Joe Orton, *Loot*, in *The Complete Plays* (New York, 1976), p. 271.

[3] This is the figure for Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* in 1593.

[4] 1.2.76–7. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare's plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974). Hamlet never experiences Bottom's anxiety: he assumes Claudius's guilt and does not consider the possibility of Claudius's misreading the play or of him misreading Claudius.

[5] Subha Mukherji, *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2006).

to hear, kindly to judge, our play' (prologue, 34). The epilogue to Robert Tailor's *The Hog hath Lost his Pearl* (1611) asks for applause if the play 'hath pleased the judicial ear' (epilogue, 8).[6] The metatheatrical page in Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* (1599) is reluctant to sit 'in judgment' on his author's decision to include dialogue in Italian (4.1.224).[7] The judicial language is logical. Law courts were parallel to the theatres: open-air gatherings which the general public, of all ranks, was entitled to attend.

The problem with audiences is that they are unpredictable. You can't rehearse them. What they expect may not be what you want to give them (as we see in Beaumont's *Knight of the Burning Pestle* where the two citizens have tastes which are resistant to the company's romance offering, *The London Merchant*). And audiences are diverse; as the actor complains to the three playgoers in John Day's *The Isle of Gulls* (1606), the company can't please everybody: one playgoer wants a city satire, another wants sex scenes, the third huffing speeches (A2r–v).[8]

A further problem is that audiences do not come to the theatre with blank minds. The Prologue to Middleton's *Roaring Girl* (1611) says:

> Each one comes
> And brings a play in's head with him: up he sums
> What *he* would of a roaring girl have writ. (Prologue, 3–5, my italics)[9]

The First Gentleman playgoer in *The Isle of Gulls* muses why the author 'call[s] his play *The Ile of Gulls*, it begets much expectation' (A2r).[10] Martin Meisel has said that drama is the creation and management of audience expectation;[11] and as these two examples show, audience expectations begin before they even enter the theatre.

How does an author bridge the gap between the play and the audience's expectations of it? The ideal solution is to bring your own audience. (This is the satiric opening of the *Isle of Gulls*: 'And where sits his [the author's] friends? hath he not a prepard company of gallants, to aplaud

[6] *The Hog Hath Lost his Pearl*, in *Three Renaissance Usury Plays*, ed. Lloyd Edward Kermode (Manchester, 2009).

[7] John Marston, *Antonio and Mellida*, ed. G. K. Hunter (London, 1965).

[8] John Lyly had complained about the same thing fifteen years earlier in the prologue to *Midas*: the courtier wants love comedy, the soldier, tragedy, rustics pastoral. *Midas* in *Galatea and Midas*, ed. G. K. Hunter and David Bevington (Manchester, 2000), Prologue, 12–14.

[9] References to Middleton plays are to *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford, 2007).

[10] Prologues frequently talk about the expectations raised by the title: see Jonson's *Poetaster*, Robert Tailor's *The Hog Hath Lost his Pearl.*

[11] Martin Meisel, *How Plays Work* (Oxford, 2007), p. 97.

his jests and grace out his play?' (A2r).) The practical solution is to train your audience. This is something that drama can do that the novel cannot: no novelist knows her audience/readership. But theatres had individual identities in early modern London—the Red Bull attracted a certain kind of audience, the Globe another—just as London theatres do today (the Royal Court stages a different kind of drama from the Haymarket Theatre Royal). And the fact that there is already an audience catchment area means that you can train that audience.

One of the ways you can train audiences is by putting them on stage, dramatising right and wrong reactions. Drama has always put audiences on stage.[12] The Chorus in Greek drama is an audience surrogate: that's why it can change its mind as the play progresses, responding as the plot unfolds and cueing our ethical contemplation. Elizabethan theatre is full of metatheatrical scenes and references—from prologues and epilogues, dumbshows, masques, inductions and plays within plays. There is not a single Elizabethan play that does not show us a spectator commenting on, interpreting, or reacting emotionally to what they have seen or heard. This is not an exaggeration but a loose interpretation of inset drama: Miranda suffering 'with those that [she] saw suffer' (*Tempest* 1.1.6); Desdemona listening to Othello's adventure stories, weeping in response and (the anti-theatricalists' worst nightmare) being distracted from her work to return for repeat hearings (*Othello* 1.3.127–70); Cassius and Brutus at the feast of the Lupercal with Cassius interpreting Caesar's performance of reluctance to accept a crown (*Julius Caesar* 1.2.235–50); the Nurse's showstopping monologue in *Romeo and Juliet* which changes the scene from one in which the Nurse is to be audience to a private conversation between mother and daughter to one in which they become the audience to her earthquake memory monologue (1.3).

The frequency with which characters in *The Taming of the Shrew* step back to watch a drama take place under their nose is astonishing. Just forty-five lines into Act 1, Baptista's daughters and Bianca's wooers enter noisily and Lucentio, newly arrived in Padua, responds to the disruption: 'What company is this?' (1.1.46). Tranio offers the improbable response: 'Master, some show to welcome us to town' (1.1.47). This sets the ensuing structure of the play, in which a group of characters regularly stands aside to act as onstage audience to a new episode. Stage audiences make irresistible theatre but in Elizabethan theatre, which saw the rise of the first *pro-*

[12] On audience surrogates, see Meisel, pp. 110–12.

fessional theatre companies, they serve a very important purpose. They teach audiences what to pay attention to, how to respond: how to read costume, props, body language, pauses, genre.

We see all of these in Middleton's city comedy, *A Mad World My Masters* (1607). The onstage audience members, satirised as individuals elsewhere in the play, become astute readers of drama. They appreciate the prologue's 'nimble conceit'—that is, they understand the dominant metaphor (5.2.28). One interprets a character's movement: 'how moodily he walks' (5.2.57)—he is reading body language. Another identifies a character as a justice by his props: 'What plays he, trow?'—'A Justice, upon my credit. I know by the chain there' (5.2.57–8). When the Constable is left tied to a chair and there is an uncomfortable hiatus in the action, one spectator uses his understanding of plot convention to propose a solution: 'Methinks some should pass by before this time and pity the Constable'—he is reading genre (5.2.142–4).

The tour de force of theatrical training is Jonson's *Magnetic Lady* (1634) which actually has one of its onstage spectators ask 'who should teach us the right or wrong at a play?' (Act 2, Chorus, line 69).[13] The answer Jonson gives is: the play itself. He begins with an extended metaphor about a reel of thread:

> a good play is like a skein of silk: which, if you take by the right end, you may wind off at pleasure on the bottom or card of your discourse in a tale or so, how you will: but if you light on the wrong end, you will pull all into a knot. (Induction, 130–4)

Throughout, the onstage spectators engage in discussion with one of the actors about theme, topical allusion, allegory, misinterpretation, the dangers of over-reading, and the cleverness of certain plot devices. Jonson was particularly sensitive to audience potential for misreading his plays, of course. But the point in *The Magnetic Lady*, as in all the above examples, is that 'audiences are not born, but made'.[14] Raymond Williams writes that 'It is the way in which people have learned to see and respond

[13] Ben Jonson, *The Magnetic Lady*, ed. Peter Happé (Manchester, 2000).

[14] Meisel, p. 126. The citizens, Nell and George, in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* initially judge the play by the values they bring to the playhouse; then they cross an interpretive border and learn to judge by the values of the play: romance values. When Rafe is in the clutches of a giant and the situation seems dire, the citizens suggest that Rafe 'could convert [the giant]' (Act 3, lines 422–3). This is the suggestion of someone who understands theatrical conventions and is now attuned to genre. Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, ed. Michael Hattaway (London, 1981).

that creates the first essential condition for drama.'[15] There are many ways in which people learn to see and respond but one of them is the drama itself.

II Character

Let us move from onstage audiences to the entire cast of characters in a play. One of the things fictional characters do on stage is read other fictional characters: they try to interpret their actions, reactions, motives.[16] The opening line of *King Lear* gives us Kent's surprise that he has misread Lear: 'I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall' (1.1.1). Hamlet tries to read himself: having seen Fortinbras's purposefulness, Hamlet says:

> Now whether it be
> Bestial oblivion or some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on th'event . . .
> I do not know
> Why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do',
> Since I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
> To do't. (4.4.39–46)

(The dominant question of twentieth-century criticism—why does Hamlet delay?—is a question Hamlet actually asks of himself.) When Othello shows anger, Lodovico's interpretation is: 'May be th' letter mov'd him' (4.1.235). When Othello weeps in the next scene, Desdemona asks:

[15] Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 178. Characters in early modern plays constantly, metatheatrically, direct our attention to what we should be thinking about. Like all Elizabethan literature they want us to think about language and rhetoric (see discussions of imagery, or of speeches from other plays, in Anon, *Selimus*; Ben Jonson, *Every Man In His Humour*; John Marston, *Antonio and Mellida*; George Chapman, *The Gentleman Usher*; Anon, *The Isle of Gulls*). They draw our attention to the acoustics of poetry versus prose (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*; George Peele, *The Old Wife's Tale*; Robert Tailor, *The Hog Hath Lost his Pearl*; Chapman, *The Gentleman Usher*) and to the relation between a play and its sources or the difference between readers and viewers (Chapman, *The Gentleman Usher*; Robert Tailor, *The Hog Hath Lost his Pearl*; Ben Jonson, *Every Man in his Humour*, *The Devil is an Ass*). The most frequent metatheatrical references are to genre (John Ford, *Love's Sacrifice*; Antony Munday, *The Death of Robert Earl of Huntington* and *John a Kent and John a Cumber*; George Wilkins, *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*; Shakespeare, *Richard III* and *King Lear*).

[16] See William Dodd, 'Destined livery? Character and person in Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Survey 51* (1998), 147–58 (p. 148).

> Am I the motive of these tears, my lord?
> If haply you my father do suspect
> An instrument of this your calling back,
> Lay not your blame on me. (4.2.43–6)

The characters are doing what audiences do: filling in gaps and deducing motives to understand 'character'.

Character was declared dead by Postmodernism (along with the Author and all forms of intentionality). The reasons are entirely sensible. Characters are not real people, so we can't treat them as such. They do not have minds or brains or agency. They are marks on a page; they are fictions; they have no existence outside language. Even if they did, early modern selfhood is not the same as modern selfhood, whether in life or on stage. New Historicism has taught us that the early modern self is a product of power structures and cultural contingencies. There is no identity that is not pre-scripted or historically situated or culturally mandated. Edmund's words in *King Lear* sum up the New Historicist approach to character: 'men are | As the time is' (5.3.30–1). Thus we can talk about 'character effects' (as Alan Sinfield does) or 'reality effects' (as Roland Barthes does) but not about character or reality.[17]

All of this may be true. But a number of counter-observations are also true. For instance, it is true that the frequency with which Shakespeare characters talk about knowing themselves and contemplate their own selfhood is remarkable. Antonio, at the start of *Merchant of Venice*: 'I have much ado to know myself' (1.1.7); the future Richard III at the end of *3 Henry VI*, explaining that he is not like his brothers: 'I am myself alone' (5.6.83); Coriolanus, denying emotional kinship to be 'author of himself' (5.3.36). If 'men are as the time is', Coriolanus's desideratum is impossible —or at least a radical suggestion (in which case we need to acknowledge it as such).[18]

It is also true that Shakespeare is interested in character in a different way from his contemporaries. Whereas Middleton's dramatis personae show their character, Shakespeare's both show and tell. Marlowe does ironic distancing (his plays have lots of asides, with a sense of the heroes constructing artificial identities for themselves).[19] One possible answer to

[17] Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1992), p. 58; Roland Barthes, 'The reality effect', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford, 1986), pp. 141–8.

[18] See Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge, 2010). Holbrook points out that the desire of Shakespeare characters, villains and heroes alike, to be their own selves, illustrates their resistance to the New Historicist view.

[19] Alexander Leggatt, 'The critical fortunes of Christopher Marlowe', *Queen's Quarterly*, 88 (1981), 93–9 (p. 97).

the question why did Shakespeare not write city comedy, the dominant comic genre of the seventeenth century, is that it requires a different kind of characterisation.[20] It does types; and Shakespeare doesn't do types. In the 1950s the bibliographer Alice Walker coined the term New Realism to describe Shakespeare's particular kind of character writing; this is a term we should resurrect.[21]

It is also true that Shakespeare soliloquies rarely advance plot; they deepen character.[22] Furthermore, to outlaw character criticism is to cut us off from the thing that makes Shakespeare Shakespeare. As Stanley Wells writes, Shakespeare's greatest plays start with an idea of character rather than basing a character on an idea.[23] The skill is in constructing things so that the idea does not exist (indeed, cannot exist) outside the character.

To outlaw character criticism also cuts us off from understanding Shakespeare chronology because if it is true that Shakespeare developed an interest in interiority in the 1590s it is also true that he abandoned that interest in the late romances.[24] Actors, directors and critics have long noted that the late romances present a different kind of characterisation, one that seems a diminution of the interiorised mode that Shakespeare had hitherto developed.

As Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights have argued, to outlaw character criticism is to cut us off from 400 years of Shakespeare criticism from Margaret Cavendish (1664) and Maurice Morgann (1777) onwards.[25] Tiffany Stern has recently found examples of Shakespeare characters travelling outside their plays: thus, we can find Sir Andrew Aguecheek in Germany in the seventeenth century in a composite play that has nothing to do with *Twelfth Night*.[26] Part of Shakespeare's appeal from the beginning was his characters.

[20] In his play *The School of Night* (London, 1992) Peter Whelan stages a conversation between Marlowe and Shakespeare about comedy. For Marlowe, humans are vulnerable when they laugh; laughter is the fish opening its mouth; and comedy is the bait that hides the hook. With such a philosophy Marlowe is inevitably disturbed by Shakespeare's ensuing question: 'But what if you only want to feed the fish … not catch them?' (pp. 57, 58). Marlowe's words here could apply to city comedy, and Shakespeare's reply explains his aversion to this genre.

[21] Alice Walker, *Textual Problems of the First Folio* (Cambridge, 1953).

[22] Paul Yachnin and Jessics Slights (eds.), *Character* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 7.

[23] Stanley Wells, 'Shakespeare without sources', in *Shakespearian Comedy*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 14, 1972), pp. 58–74.

[24] Anne Barton, 'Leontes and the Spider: language and speaker in Shakespeare's last plays', in *Shakespeare's Styles*, ed. Philip Edwards, Inga-Stina Ewbank and G. K. Hunter (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 131–50.

[25] Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights (eds.), *Character* p. 5.

[26] Tiffany Stern, 'Marts and fairs: Shakespeare and mass entertainment', unpublished paper delivered at SAA annual meeting, Seattle, 9 April 2011.

Character is also important in editorial decisions. In the willow scene in *Othello* the Folio text gives the line 'This Lodovico is a proper man' to Desdemona (TLN 3006).[27] Both Arden 2 and 3 reassign the line to Emilia, and Arden 3 explains why: 'for Desdemona to praise Lodovico at this point seems *out of character*' (my italics).[28] Something similar happens in *The Tempest*. In Act 1 Miranda has a long speech in which she speaks violently to Caliban:

> Abhorred slave,
> Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
> Being capable of all ill: I pitied thee,
> Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
> One thing or another. . . . (1.2.352–6)

She continues thus for seven more lines. From Dryden on, the speech has been reassigned to Prospero on the grounds of decorum (Miranda cannot speak violently) and logic (is it likely that a child was able to teach Caliban?). Recent editorial practice has restored the speech to Miranda. The reasons for restoring it are just as character-based as the reasons for removing it: that Miranda should speak angrily when addressing a creature who tried to rape her is not improbable. But if it is not appropriate to 'do' character, do we need to rethink editorial practices that are character-based?

I do not wish to overstate the case for the New Realism because it is also true that this Shakespearean inwardness exists side by side with character conventions that come from different, pre-Shakespearean genres. Beatrice and Benedick belong to the New Realism but Hero and Claudio do not. There are old character conventions operating here too; but it is precisely for that reason that we should pay attention to the new.[29]

I am arguing not just that character is an important category but that it is a quintessentially Shakespearean category. It is worth asking at this stage how Shakespeare creates character. One answer is: by calling attention to gaps. When Prospero says he'll retire to Milan where 'every third thought shall be [his] grave' (5.1.312), it begs the question: what are his first and second thoughts? As Tony Dawson writes, 'We feel we know these characters because we do not know them'; this creates the illusion that these characters are knowable. (Interestingly, Dawson's terminology

[27] *The First Folio*, ed. Charlton Hinman (New York, 1968).
[28] *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (London, 1997), 4.3.34–5 n., p. 291.
[29] See Ruth Lunney, *Marlowe and the Popular Tradition: Innovation in the English Drama before 1595* (Manchester, 2002); Alexander Leggatt, 'Shakespeare and the borderlines of comedy', *Mosaic*, 5 (1971), 121–32.

here echoes E. M. Forster's in his work on the novel.[30]) Gillian Woods makes a similar point when she looks at *Sir Thomas More* as a dramatic experiment in a new form of characterisation, one which leaves us 'wanting more/More', one in which interiority is created by the character's motives being left unexplained. Shakespeare creates gaps and we fill them in.[31]

But there is another gap here, the gap between theatre and real life, and Shakespeare characters negotiate that boundary. Cleopatra seems real because she disdains boy actors who might play Cleopatra. Fabian seems real because he wouldn't believe the gulling of Malvolio if it were played on a stage. Othello seems real because if it were his cue to fight he would have known it without a prompter.[32] This is an extension of the metatheatrical awareness of inductions and plays-within-plays—these characters know what plays are, so by definition are not in one.

But another answer to the question 'How does Shakespeare create character?' is that Shakespeare doesn't do anything at all—because Shakespeare doesn't write characters. Shakespeare writes *roles*; it is actors who create characters. Thus when Taffeta in *Ram Alley* defines 'a complete gallant', she says: 'A mercer formed him [i.e. provided the raw material], a tailor makes him [i.e. provides the shape] | And a player gives him spirit' (F3v). Much character criticism is based on the novel—and the novel has no intermediary. (It is a mediated form—it has a narrator—but it has no physical intermediary.) Of course it is this intermediary who so troubled M. R. Ridley when he talked about the imaginative loss inevitable through the mediation of the actor.[33] Taffeta in *Ram Alley* sees the theatre as adding or completing something, Ridley sees it as taking something away. Nor is Ridley's just a 1930s world view. As recently as 2010 Maria Di Battista could describe dramatic characters as 'confined' to the stage, quoting Georg Lukács's view that theatre's 'costumes, milieu, wealth and variety' are 'a mere compromise for the stage'.[34] But when Sir Andrew Aguecheek goes to Germany in a play that is not *Twelfth Night* (see above, n. 26), it is hard to see him as 'confined' in any way.

[30] A. B. Dawson, 'Is Timon a character?', in Yachnin and Slights (eds.), *Character*, pp. 197–213 (p. 210); E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1927), chaps. 3 and 4 (pp. 30–57).

[31] Gillian M. Woods, '"Strange discourse": the controversial subject of *Sir Thomas More*', *Renaissance Drama*, 39 (2011), 3–35.

[32] Joel Altman has recently suggested that Shakespeare writes characters metatheatrically as if they are *dramatis personae* to enable actors to create character (Altman, *The Improbability of Othello: Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood* (Chicago, IL, 2010)).

[33] M. R. Ridley, 'On reading Shakespeare' (Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy), *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 26 (1940), 197–225.

[34] Maria Di Battista, *Novel Characters* (Oxford, 2010), p. 9.

André Bazin offers a different angle from either Ridley or Di Battista. Bazin is a film theorist and he draws a contrast not between novels and plays but between plays and cinema: whereas 'in cinema [the drama] proceeds from the decor to the man', in theatre 'the drama proceeds from the actor'.[35] And in the theatre the actor is always visible—as we see in the anecdote from John Manningham's *Diary* at the start of this essay, with its puzzling question of whether the female spectator is attracted to Burbage, Richard III or Burbage-as-Richard III. Theatre blurs the boundary between actor and character. Hence Robert Weimann's rejection of the term 'character' and substitution of a compound: actor–character.[36]

Thinking about actors complicates thinking about characters. As Bridget Escolme points out in *Talking to the Audience*, 'characters have motives but actors have motives too and they are not the same as the characters''.[37] Actors want audience attention; they want audiences to laugh in the right place. The so-called submission speech of Katherine at the end of *Taming of the Shrew* may be a moment of personality extinction for a tamed Renaissance wife but it is also a moment of the actor's greatest on-stage triumph: centre stage, her longest speech, surprising her audience.

Julie Hankey's production history of *Othello* notes the temptation for Iagos to upstage their Othellos.[38] (Othello may be the tragic hero but Iago has the longer role, more soliloquies, and direct addresses to the audience.) Thus an additional set of motives comes into play, undreamt of by Coleridge, and the thespian relationship between Othellos and Iagos starts to parallel the play's plot. Playing Othello in the eighteenth century, Samuel Foote was grateful that his Iago, Charles Macklin, 'understood his subordinate position'.[39] Iago is doubly kept in his place, subordinate as character and as actor: subordinate in the play to Cassio's lieutenancy, subordinate in the company because he's not the titular hero. Where is the boundary here between play world and real world?

When New Historicists say we must not talk about characters as if they are real people, they forget that on stage characters are embodied by real people. New Historicism turned its back on mimesis and substituted representation; but drama is both. The prologue to *Ram Alley* is very aware of this. The company present

[35] Quoted by Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 8.
[36] Robert Weimann, 'The actor–character in "secretly open" action: doubly encoded personation on Shakespeare's stage', in Yachnin and Slights (eds.), *Character*, pp. 177–96 (p. 182).
[37] Bridget Escolme, *Talking to the Audience* (Abingdon, 2005), p. 16.
[38] Julie Hankey (ed.), *Othello*. 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 2005), p. 27.
[39] Hankey (ed.), *Othello*, p. 27. The phrasing is Hankey's.

> Things never done with that [i.e such] true life
> That thought and wits shall stand at strife [i.e. the audience will be challenged]
> Whether the things now shown be true [i.e. whether this be lifelike]
> Or whether we ourselves now do
> The things we but present. (sig. A2, spelling modernised)

The last few lines are complex. Is 'or' a contrasting conjunction (as it should be grammatically) or a casual substitute for the copulative 'and'? In other words, is this a contrast or a duplication? Or is the sense deliberately blurred, the lines morphing from representation into a reality that paradoxically 'but present[s]'?

Furthermore, the actor's body that presents the character is not a neutral space. As Marvin Carlson says, it is a site of significance, haunted by previous roles.[40] Shakespeare plays with this in *Hamlet* when Polonius reminisces about his university drama days playing Julius Caesar and Hamlet comments on his murder by Brutus. The Polonius-actor had just played, or was still playing, Caesar in the current season opposite Burbage's Brutus—and their roles as victim and assassin are about to be replayed when Hamlet kills Polonius. When we watch Burbage play Othello in 1604, in a play that ends as a tragedy, can we forget that in 1598 he played another jealous husband, the onomastically similar Thorello in Jonson's *Every Man In his Humor*?

Keir Elam reminds us that when we see a scar on an actor's leg, we wonder if it belongs to the actor or to the character.[41] There is a somatic semiotics here: we start reading the body. The body is insistently present in Shakespeare's plays. When Sir Toby says in *Twelfth Night* that he'll fool Malvolio black and blue, we reflect: you don't *fool* someone black and blue; you *beat* them black and blue. The plots of plays are enacted by bodies. The title of *Measure for Measure* comes from the sermon on the mount in a context about equivalence and justice but the plot plays this out with physical substitutions: Isabella's body for Claudio's life, Barnardine's death for Claudio's, Ragozine's head for Claudio's head, Mariana for Isabella. *The Tempest* three times uses the verb 'beating'. The memory of the storm beats still in Miranda's mind (1.2.176). Prospero walks aside 'to still my beating mind' (4.1.163). And when Alonso is embraced by Prospero at the end—'I embrace thy body' (5.1.109)—he knows the body is real and

[40] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: the Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2003), pp. 4–5.
[41] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. 2nd edn. (London, 2002).

not another 'enchanted trifle' because 'thy pulse | Beats as of flesh and blood' (5.1.113–14). Memories—like Miranda's, beating in Act 1—and emotions—like Prospero's beating mind in Act 4—take place in bodies which also have a beating rhythm.[42]

Audience response is registered in the body too. Hamlet addresses the onstage spectators of his tragic end: 'You that look pale, and tremble at this chance' (*Hamlet* 5.2.334). Antony, seeing a servant weep over Caesar's body, weeps too:

> Passion, I see, is catching, for mine eyes,
> Seeing those beads of sorrow stand in thine,
> Began to water. (*Julius Caesar* 3. 1. 283–5)

In *3 Henry VI* York's enemy, Northumberland, listens to York's tale of bereavement:

> Beshrew me, but his passions moves me so
> That hardly can I check my eyes from tears. (1.4.150–1)[43]

Shakespeare has the concept of what we now call mirror neurons: seeing someone else's emotional reaction triggers a parallel reaction in you. This is why theatre is so powerful. As Francis Bacon, a scientist, puts it unscientifically—in fact, poetically—theatre is a 'plectrum to play men's souls'.[44]

And this is what distinguishes 'bad' characters in Shakespeare: they are bad audience members; they respond inappropriately. Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* is someone who laughs at tragedy, who laughs when he sees others cry:

> [I] Beheld his tears, and laugh'd so heartily
> That both mine eyes were rainy like to his. (*Titus Andronicus* 5.1.116–17)[45]

In Marlowe's *Dido Queen of Carthage*, Aeneas recounts the fall of Troy and tells us that a weeping Priam begged Pyrrhus to spare his life. Pyrrhus 'not moved at all but smiling at his [Priam's] tears, . . . struck off his hands' (2.1.240).[46]

[42] See Alexander Leggatt, 'Shakespeare and the actor's body', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 10 (1986), 95–1079 (esp. pp. 106–7).

[43] This is why the antitheatricalists are anti theatre. They are not anti drama. They are tolerant of people reading drama: they are worried about the emotional effect on *audiences*.

[44] Quoted by Matthew Steggle, *Laughing and Weeping in Early Modern Theatre* (Aldershot, 2007), p. 7.

[45] Contrast the reaction of Lucius who, 'in passion mov'd, | Doth weep to see his grandsire's heaviness' (3.2.48–9).

[46] Christopher Marlowe, *Complete Plays and Poems*, ed. E. D. Pendry and J. C. Maxwell (London, 1976).

In many senses actors and audiences are parallel figures. Actors perform individually yet work in a group. So too do audiences: we enter the theatre an individual, we leave as an audience. The parallels also work physically, as the above examples show. Actors have bodies and use them to express emotions. Audiences have bodies and use them to express emotions. The gap between stage and audience is not so great: the two worlds are connected through human bodies, through a somaticised humanity.

So far this lecture has explored gaps and boundaries: the gap between fictional characters and the actors who portray them; the boundary between play and audience. I turn now to *Othello*, which takes the gaps and boundaries between actor/character and audience/play and turns them into plot.

III *Othello*

In 1912 a Cambridge psychologist, Edward Bullough, wrote a seminal article on aesthetics.[47] Bullough was interested in the concept of what he called 'Psychical distance': what, he asked, is the ideal balance between audience involvement in a play and their emotional distance from it?[48] Spectators need to be sufficiently distanced to know they're at a play—they must not 'run on stage to stop Othello from strangling Desdemona'[49]—but not so distanced that they lose empathy. For Bullough, drama (and the aesthetic experience) needs Distance—but the least amount of Distance you can have without losing Distance altogether ('the utmost decrease of Distance without its disappearance'). The ideal play operates on the boundary between total identification and intellectual detachment. Go too far in one direction and you get *over*-distancing—which produces the impression of improbability or artificiality or absurdity (Bullough's examples here are farce and melodrama); go too far in the opposite direction and you get *under*-distancing. The mechanicals in *A Midsummer*

[47] Edward Bullough, '"Psychical distance" as a factor in art and an aesthetic principle', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 5 (1912), 87–118.

[48] Distance can be spatial (studio versus amphitheatre), temporal (medieval ecclesiastical art versus today's contemplation of it in a secular setting) or emotional. It is this last with which I am concerned.

[49] This example comes from the philosopher David Fenner in 2004 who applies and develops Bullough's theory; but Bullough instances *Othello* too. David E. W. Fenner, 'In celebration of imperfection', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 38 (2004), p. 72.

Night's Dream foresee both these problems in 'Pyramus and Thisbe'. They think the audience will imagine that what it sees is real (under-distancing); but they also think that that audience will not imagine what it cannot see: over-distancing. So they overcorrect in both directions and inadvertently destroy the delicate balancing act which drama requires—a balancing act dependent, Bullough argues, on the audience's bipartite vision, its awareness of boundaries: 'we *know* a thing *not* to exist but we *accept its existence*' (Bullough's emphases).[50] We know cognitively that it is representation but we respond emotionally to it as mimesis.

The antinomy of distance, Bullough reminds us, is a property of the viewer and not of the work of art; it therefore differs for each spectator because we all have different distance thresholds. (Not everyone wants to make a sexual assignation with Burbage.) The chief risk to Distance in drama, Bullough observes, is the body of the actor.[51] This is a risk that no other art form encounters, not even bodily related ones like dance or sculpture. Bullough's work on the body, Distance and the audience–actor boundary is helpful in understanding *Othello*.

Othello is a tragedy of theatre boundaries gone wrong. It begins with an auditor, Desdemona, crossing the border from audience member to playworld to marry the actor–character Othello. When Othello tells the Senate about how he wooed Desdemona with adventure stories, she represents the ideal audience member: attentive to language, hungry for more, a repeat auditor. Critics have long noted that Othello's identity here, like all identity, is performative, a rhetorical construct, projected, packaged, performed, and that his sense of himself is dependent on his audience's response. (This is the idea we find in *Julius Caesar* where Brutus says 'the eye sees not itself | But by reflection' (*Julius Caesar* 1.2.52–3) and in *Troilus and Cressida* where Ulysses says that no man knows his qualities 'Till he behold them formed in th' applause' (3.3.119). In *Othello* this leads to the questions of traditional character criticism: can Desdemona really know Othello or he her, given that what he presents and she responds to is a performance?) Thus the problem is that Desdemona blurs the storyteller and the story told, she confuses the character and the actor. She responds as Manningham's female audience member did to Burbage as Richard III. Desdemona wants to have Burbage—or Othello—or Burbage-as-Othello. She marries a fictional character, an epic hero, not a man.

[50] Bullough, 'Psychical distance', p. 113.
[51] He itemises the several ways drama deals with this: language, for instance (especially verse); costume; mise en scene; shapes of stages and sizes of theatre (the evolution of Distance, he argues, is closely tied to the history of staging).

One of the interesting things about spectatorship is the paradoxical nature of its interest in the actor–character: we want to interact with the hero—to be in his world, his life—but we also want to *be* the hero. Gender is not relevant: a female spectator can want to be the hero's wife and she can simultaneously want to be the hero himself. Desdemona's language registers this audience doubleness: she 'wish'd | That heaven had made her such a man' (1.3.162–3). Made a man like that for her (where 'her' is dative)? or created her as an action-hero (where 'her' is accusative)? The grammatical ambiguity registers perfectly the audience experience where the answer is: both.

When Desdemona crosses the boundary from audience to play with her romantic interest in Othello she initiates a comic structure. Almost all the inductions or plays-within-plays which show spectators interacting with a player are comedies. It is customary to view *Othello* as a tragedy that begins as a comedy but the location of this comic opening is usually seen either in the elopement (a conventional comic plot) or the January–May marriage (conventional cuckold comedy). I think the generic problem begins when Desdemona can't keep audience and actor separate. Once this theatrical boundary is crossed, every other theatrical boundary falls. *No one* in this play understands genre. Desdemona's artless and loving repetitions when she petitions Othello for Cassio's reinstatement flout every conduct book rule for the dutiful wife and take her into the comic territory of the nagging shrew:

> My lord shall never rest,
> I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience;
> His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift. (3.3.22–4)

If she is in a comedy acting a shrew but does not know it, Iago knows he's in a comedy (he's writing it, he's directing it) but, as Emma Smith points out, he does not know the rules of the genre: comedy does not do death.[52]

We are accustomed to seeing *Othello* as a play about racial boundaries, and all the other borders in the play (the compound words, paradoxes, mixed genres) as an embodiment of its mixed-marriage theme. I suggest that it is the other way round and that miscegenation is a metonymy for the play's theatrical anxiety. This is perhaps why this play is so unusually dependent on a prop: the handkerchief. Comedies are full of props: the rope, the ducats in *Comedy of Errors*, misdirected letters in *Love's Labour's*

[52] Emma Smith, *Othello* (Horndon, Devon, 2005), pp. 73–89. We might also note that Iago is not good at endings (Desdemona accuses him of a 'most lame and impotent conclusion' at 2.1.161).

Lost, recognition tokens in the romances. But props are not the properties of tragedy.

Thus, theatrical boundaries fall when Desdemona crosses from the world of the audience, and we see this everywhere in *Othello*. This is a play in which characters speak each other's lines (theatrically every actor's nightmare). Othello's first words in the play are actually spoken by Iago:

> for, 'Certes', says he,
> 'I have already chose my officer' (1.1.16–17)[53]

This, of course, is simply a direct quotation. But it foreshadows what Iago will do to Othello: ventriloquise him. Iago echoes Othello and then Othello echoes him, and then Othello speaks with Iago's vocabulary. This habit is not confined to the Iago/Othello dyad. In Act 1 the Duke says to Brabantio: 'Let me speak like yourself' (1.3.199). It is an odd phrase, and has perplexed editors. Arden 3 gives us two alternative glosses: let me speak 'by giving advice'; or: let me speak 'as ideally you would speak'.[54] But the clarity of Honigmann's Arden gloss underlines the oddity of the Duke's actual phrasing. In the theatre we don't want someone speaking like someone else. Identity is, as Joel Altman, Giorgio Melchiori, Peter Holland and others have demonstrated, rhetorically constructed. We know who characters are because of the way they speak like themselves.[55]

But in *Othello* identities merge because language conflates them. Desdemona is 'our great captain's captain' (2.1.74); 'Our general's wife is now the general' (2.3.314–15). This linguistic expression of a positive, marital inseparation, the two-in-one of marriage, is confused by language because one of these phrases, spoken by Cassio, is a compliment; the other, spoken by Iago, is pejorative. Characters' identities are not kept apart in this play, a violation of theatrical rules. As Ben Morgan points out, identity breaks down because ultimately Iago fractures the verb 'to be': 'I am not what I am' (1.1.65), 'Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago' (1.1.57).[56]

Another thespian nightmare occurs in this play when characters have premature entrances. Desdemona arrives in Cyprus seven days before

[53] I am grateful to Mamoru Takano for this observation.
[54] *Othello*, ed. Honigmann, 1.3.200 n.
[55] Altman, *The Improbability of Othello* (see above, n. 32); Giorgio Melchiori, 'The rhetoric of character construction: *Othello*', *Shakespeare Survey 34* (1981), 61–72; Peter Holland, 'The resources of characterization in *Othello*', *Shakespeare Survey 41* (1989), 119–32; James L. Calderwood, 'Speech and self in *Othello*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38 (1987), 293–303.
[56] Ben Morgan, *Shakespeare's Paratheatre*, forthcoming.

she's expected (contrast Cinthio, where all the characters arrive together because they have travelled on the same boat).[57] Bianca enters in Act 4, not on cue, to berate Cassio. His first words to her are: 'What do you mean by this haunting of me?' (4.2.147)—in other words, 'What are you doing here? I wasn't expecting you.' The plot (which is itself a plot of plots and improvisations) is insistently coded as theatrical. The gulling of Roderigo is a rehearsal for the gulling of Othello. Othello's voyeurism parallels our own as spectators. Both Desdemona and Cassio speak after they've technically been pronounced dead: Desdemona revives (impossibly) after being strangled; Cassio 'spake | (After long seeming dead)' (5.2.327–8).

This is also, crucially, a play in which key actors have no motive. Iago's lack of motive is famous. But Othello also merits attention because of the way in which his speeches repeat nouns like 'cause' and 'motive' and because of his obsession with finding the causes of things: 'who began this?' (2.3.178). Critics and actors often ponder Emilia's motive for stealing the handkerchief. We associate motive with twentieth-century Method acting but recent work by Lorna Hutson, James McBain, Tiffany Stern and Simon Palfrey has shown how this is a crucial component of Elizabethan acting—whether you locate it, as Hutson and McBain do, in the influence of legal rhetoric or, as Stern and Palfrey do, in the ontological questions forced upon the Elizabethan actor who received only his own part plus a one- to three-word cue. Stern and Palfrey see this as an existential help rather than a practical hindrance: the lack of context and the brevity of the cue force the actor into complex questions about the relation of cue to speech and of part to whole. Hutson has argued that the rhetoric of judicial narrative, taught in schools, encouraged orators and lawyers to focus on character and motivation (these are key components of all legal thinking from trials to the detective novel) and that this fed into sixteenth-century drama. McBain develops her argument arguing that motive is so well established as a dramatic essential by the mid century that it can be parodied (as in, for example, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*).[58] Thus, long before Stanislavski, motive is an important theatrical ingredient. In *Othello* Shakespeare takes it away. (Contrast his source in Cinthio where Iago's motive is clear: his love for Desdemona turns to hate because she shows no interest in him.) It is no wonder that characters in *Othello*

[57] Honigmann prints the relevant portion as Appendix 3.

[58] Lorna Hutson, 'Forensic aspects of Renaissance mimesis', *Representations*, 94 (2006), 80–109; James McBain, *Early Tudor Drama and Legal Culture*, D.Phil. thesis (University of Oxford, 2007), chap. 5; Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford, 2007).

spend so much time trying to work each other out: Shakespeare has removed a theatrical essential.

If the tragedy begins when/because Desdemona crosses the boundary between audience and play, it ends in the same way when Othello blurs the boundary between drama and life. Othello tells a story about what he did to someone in Aleppo and then identifies himself with that someone as he 'smote him—thus' (5.2.356). A grammatical third person becomes a physical first-person; 'him' in the narrative is now inseparable from 'myself' in the present. Othello resurrects the distancing boundaries of theatre only to cross them. And between Desdemona's theatrical boundary-crossing at the beginning and Othello's at the end, every other theatrical boundary falls: genre collapses, language collapses, identity collapses—and always in the same way: two separate things become one.

What is interesting about Edward Bullough's 1912 argument about distance, offered as an intervention in aesthetics, is that it was adopted by twentieth-century economists trying to understand how to enter foreign markets. They used it to negotiate the subjectively perceived cultural differences between 'home' and 'foreign', between 'self' and 'other'—exactly the terms of current race criticism in early modern drama and *Othello*.

It is customary to view *Othello* as a play about Self and Other. I am suggesting that it understands those categories as theatrical rather than racial: that the plot originates not in a white woman marrying a black man but in an audience member falling in love with an actor–character. It is interesting that Edward Bullough gives as an example of audience under-distancing a hypothetical instance of a spectator intervening in Act 5 of *Othello* (so do those philosophers influenced by Bullough (for example, David Fennor)). As it happens, performance history offers more examples of audience interruption of *Othello* than of any other Shakespeare play. In 1660 Pepys's Diary tells how a lady near him cried out when Desdemona was smothered. In 1825 a man in the front row called Iago a 'damn'd lying scoundrel' and offered to meet him after the show to break his neck. In 1822 in Baltimore a soldier on guard duty in the theatre shot the actor of Othello saying 'It will never be said in my presence a confounded Negro has killed a white woman.'[59] These stories

[59] These examples come from Hankey (ed.), *Othello*, pp. 17, 4–5. Of the last example she notes wryly that wife-murder is clearly tolerable until it crosses the colour bar.

can be multiplied. Audience members, I suggest, are responding to the play's own confusion of boundaries.

Raymond Williams said that 'drama begins with the audience'. In *Othello,* Shakespeare shows how *tragedy* begins with an audience member who does not understand the rules of being an audience member.