SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

# SHAKESPEARE AND THE PLAYERS

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IT is very frequently said—I have said it myself—that Shakespeare was first and foremost a dramatist, a writer for the theatre; and, consequently, that only in the theatre can his full impact be measured. His words may be poetry, but poetry in a physical context: doubly so in that, first, they acquire resonance, as it were, only when uttered in a living human voice and, second, they are reinforced or counterpointed by visual effects, by gesture, by the significant juxtaposition or opposition of the figures on the stage. The words by themselves are not what we mean by 'Shakespeare', but only a part of Shakespeare; for the poet worked not in words alone but in that whole complex three-dimensional medium we call the art of the theatre. If the author's intention is of interest and importance to us (and I know that there are some who deny this) it is imperative (so runs the argument) that we should acquire some understanding of the capabilities and limitations of this medium of his. It is my intention here to examine how far we have really succeeded in doing this and, by the way, to subject the argument itself to some scrutiny.

Upon the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre in itself, that is upon the staging of Shakespeare's plays, a great deal of research has been done. Indeed the facts discovered or credibly deduced have been so many that they now begin to cancel each other out. Basic principles that thirty years ago seemed so firmly established that actual stages could be reconstructed to their specifications must now be discarded. It is quite clear that that famous 'inner stage', pictured in every textbook (but not unfortunately in any contemporary illustration) did not exist; and its companion, the balcony, is almost equally discredited, at least in any form remotely like that in which we have been used to conceive it. One iconoclast[1] has gone so far as to suggest, not altogether without plausibility though I cannot myself accept his suggestion, that the main stage itself, the 'apron',

[1] Leslie Hotson, 'Shakespeare's Arena', in *The Sewanee Review*, July 1953.

was not an apron at all but an isolated platform with the audience all round it and the tiring room beneath it rather than behind and supporting it. Nevertheless, I do not think that we should allow ourselves to be rattled by this new uncertainty, which seems to me to disturb only the marginal details of our knowledge. The two for-our-purpose-essential qualities of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres have been established with absolute clarity and remain so. Their stages allowed the actor a remarkably direct and intimate contact with his audience; and they possessed an unmatchable flexibility, so that the widest possible variety of actions could follow each other with unbroken pace and momentum and be juxtaposed with the maximum of contrast.

About the players on these stages we know, I believe, even more than about the stages themselves. We have their articles of association, their account books, the records of their litigation both among themselves and against their common enemies or exploiters; we have the testimony as to their goings on (not all of it necessarily factual or impartial) brought by the puritan critics who found the theatres a public scandal and danger; we have the players' defences against these accusations. We have prompt-books, props lists, casts (all too few of these, but still some). The difficulty, as so often in Shakespearian studies, is to see the wood for the trees. On the one hand are the great works of reference, the collections of documents published by Halliwell Phillipps or Professor C. W. Wallace, Sir Edmund Chambers's four volumes on the Elizabethan Stage, Sir Walter Greg's editions of Philip Henslowe's papers. On the other hand is a host of more popular books reconstructing, with a greater or a lesser degree of responsibility, the life and profession of an actor in Shakespeare's time; but these are so full of obvious misconstructions and wild conjectures that even the best of them is, in my view, palpably more unreliable than any puritan tract. As far as I know, then, the basic, established facts have never been codified, never brought within the grasp of what I may call the 'user' of Shakespeare plays, be he actor or scholar.

What follows is a first sketch for such a codification. It owes much to Professor T. W. Baldwin's book *The Organisation and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company*.[1] I wish I could think that I might repay some of my indebtedness by this redirection of attention to what I believe is an unfairly neglected work.

[1] T. W. Baldwin, *The Organisation and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company*, Princeton, 1927.

Certainly it should be approached with caution. Professor Baldwin by no means confines himself to recording the facts, but reaches out, from the platform of facts he has constructed, into conjecture. For example, he produces complete cast-lists for Shakespeare's plays by extrapolation from the surviving casts of seven plays acted by the Shakespearian company. Unfortunately not one of these surviving lists actually falls within the period of Shakespeare's working life: one is dated 1590, one 1613, and the remainder between 1623 and 1632. Baldwin's lines of extension must therefore be long ones. Their validity, moreover, depends in part on whether the Shakespearian plays to which they are applied are accurately dated; and Baldwin's dating of at least the early works is distinctly unorthodox. In his later chapters, too, he becomes careless and writes of some of his conjectures as if they were proven facts. Nevertheless, the possible ricketiness of some parts of the superstructure should not make us doubt the essential solidity of the foundations.

The first thing that emerges, with great clarity, from any study of the Elizabethan theatre is the extraordinary unity, cohesion, continuity of the acting companies in general and in particular of that company to which Shakespeare himself belonged. Three or four conditioning factors, separate or partly interlinked, combined to stamp this character on the companies. In the first place actors were not allowed by the authorities to exercise their profession at all except under the sponsorship of some noble patron. They were enrolled as part of his 'household' and wore his livery, no more than a distinguishing badge, perhaps, for everyday, but on ceremonial occasions a complete uniform. It is through these enrolments, and the records of the issue of new liveries for a state marriage or a funeral, that we have such precise knowledge of the membership of more than one company. From May 1594 the company to which Shakespeare belonged was under the successive patronage of the two Lord Hunsdons, father and son, each in his turn Lord Chamberlain, from which the company took its name of the Chamberlain's Men. On the accession of James I in 1603 Shakespeare and his fellows passed, as the King's Men, under the direct patronage of the crown, and their successors continued so until the theatres were closed in 1642. The Lord Chamberlain's company itself probably grew out of a reorganization, under the patronage of the short-lived Lord Strange, of the several companies that in the eighties had achieved, as the

Earl of Leicester's men, the highest reputation. Certainly three at least of the founding members of Strange's, namely Will Kemp, Thomas Pope, and George Bryan, had served Leicester, and the other two, Augustine Philips and John Hemings, cannot be traced to any other company. Thus the standing of the company had been from the very first, as it continued, of the highest; and its members could derive a corporate pride from the fact that they were, like Chaucer's guildsmen, 'of a solempne and greet fraternitee' and went 'clothed alle of o lyveree'.

In the second place the companies were organized very much like trade guilds, though it now seems unlikely that they were, as Baldwin claimed, actually trade guilds and bound by the legal regulations governing such bodies. At their head were the leading actors, the masters of the craft, recognized as such by the honorific 'Master' accorded them in such stage documents as prompt-books and cast-lists, and drawing their remuneration from a share of the takings. In the Chamberlain's company these 'sharers' were, as we have seen, at first five only, but a warrant of 15 March 1595[1] shows that the number had been already raised to seven by the addition of Richard Burbage and William Shakespeare. The next check is the patent granted by James I on 19 May 1603.[2] It omits Bryan and Pope, who had retired, the latter very recently, and Kemp the clown who had left the company in 1600 for free-lance work. It adds not, as might be expected for replacement, two new names besides that of Robert Armin (Kemp's successor as clown) but four: Fletcher, Cowley, Condell, Sly; so that it is clear that the membership had again been extended, to nine. By August 1604, as appears from a payment made to the company for waiting on the Spanish ambassador,[3] the sharers were twelve, and this remained the number for the rest of the company's history.

These masters, as in other trades, took in apprentices who might eventually themselves graduate as masters. In comparison with other trades, however, membership of the first grade was of necessity very strictly limited. This meant both that the apprentices were themselves restricted in number, and that even so some failed to find a place as permanent members of the company because at the time of their graduation there was no vacancy. Some indeed returned eventually as masters after a period as hired men or even as masters with other companies.

[1] J. T. Murray, *English Dramatic Companies 1558–1642* (London, 1910), vol. i, p. 106. [2] *Malone Society Collections* (1908), vol. i, pp. 264–5.

[3] E. Law, *Shakespeare as a Groom of the Chamber* (London, 1910), p. 21.

The apprentices were the most precarious element in the company, for their value as actors depreciated sharply when their voices broke. The so-called 'adult' companies, such as Shakespeare's, were not quite so vulnerable in this respect as were those entirely composed of boys and so altogether subject to the unpredictable hazards of puberty. The Burbage brothers have left it on record that one of the reasons why they were able to secure the Blackfriars theatre was that the previous occupants, the company of the Children of the Queen's Revels, were in difficulties on account of 'the boyes dayly wearing out'.[1] It was the managers of this same Revels company who in 1600 had resorted to straight kidnapping to replenish their ranks. Unfortunately for them they picked as one of their victims a certain Thomas, son of Sir Henry Clifton, who protested vigorously and successfully to the Queen. The kidnappers, he declared,[2]

in a place betweene your subiects said howse & the sayd gramer schole, called Christchurch cloister, the sayd Thomas Clifton wth greate force & vyolence did seise & surprise, & him wth lyke force & vyolence did, to the greate terror & hurte of him the sayd Thomas Clifton, hall, pull, dragge & carry awaye to the said playe howse in the blacke fryeres aforesayd . . . and . . . him the sayd Thomas Clifton, as a prisoner, comitted to the said playe howse amongste a companie of lewde & dissolute mercenary players, purposing in that place (& for noe service of your ma^tie) to vse & exercise him, the sayd Thomas Clifton, in acting of parts in base playes & enterludes, to the mercinary gayne & pryvat comoditie of . . . the said . . . confederates.

The adult companies, with fewer places to fill, were able to recruit by the normal legal method of indentures. It is not certain whether, as Baldwin suggests, each master-actor took on an apprentice to understudy his own 'line' of acting. It looks rather as if the motive behind the acceptance of an apprentice was, as often as not, pure commercial speculation. Philip Henslowe, who was no actor, 'bowght my boye Jeames brystow of william agusten player the 18 of desembr 1597 for viii li'.[3] He then leased him to the Admiral's Men for three shillings a week, or half the normal wage of an adult 'hired man'. John Shank, Armin's successor as clown in the

[1] 'Sharers' Papers', reprinted by J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps in *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare*, 7th edn. (London 1887), vol. i, p. 317.

[2] *Clifton* v. *Robinson and others*, reprinted by F. G. Fleay in *A Chronicle History of the London Stage* (London 1890), pp. 129–30.

[3] *Henslowe's Diary*, fol. 232, reprinted by R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert (Cambridge 1961), p. 241.

Shakespearian company, seems from his own account[1] to have kept a positive stable of apprentices.

Because again the prospects of advancement were so meagre, the intermediate class, of journeymen, was much more shadowy in an acting company than in a trade guild. Their place was taken by the so-called 'hired men', who had no share in the gate-money but served by the week for a fixed wage. These too were often the personal servants of individual master actors. They included all the small-part actors, the musicians, and such odd-job men as kept the doors and swept the stage.

A third factor that made for continuity and corporate feeling was peculiar to Shakespeare's company at least until the obvious success of the practice inspired imitation. Normally the theatres were built and owned by an independent landlord, who leased them to acting companies in return for a fixed proportion of the day's takings. The classic example is, of course, James Bristow's master, Philip Henslowe, landlord and financier to the Lord Admiral's Men, and for one short period to Strange's men too. But the senior members of the Chamberlain's company owned their own theatre, at least from the time of the building of the Globe in 1598, and as 'Housekeepers' shared all the proceeds. This peculiarity may have arisen from the fact that the company's first landlord, James Burbage, had a son Richard who was taken into the company to become its leading actor; and indeed Richard's share, with that of his brother Cuthbert, not a member of the company, remained larger than the others. When a housekeeper died his share passed to his heirs, unless or until, as often happened, they were bought out by the other members of the syndicate.

This close society of fellow-servants and business colleagues was further knit together by the ties of neighbourhood and intermarriage. The actors tended to settle in colonies near to the theatre at which they were regularly playing. The good apprentice frequently, in accordance with the best romantic tradition, married his master's daughter or his sister or even his widow.

I add one more cohesive influence, again peculiar to the Chamberlain's Men: the possession of a business manager of approved probity and efficiency who continued to look after the affairs of the company for a very long term of years. This was John Hemings, who became the senior editor of the first collected edition of his colleague Shakespeare's plays. He can

[1] 'Sharers' Papers', Halliwell-Phillipps, op. cit., p. 316.

be called a founder member of the company, for his name appears in the licence of 1593. He had given up acting before 1613, but appears as the man in charge of business arrangements right up to his death in 1630. He more than spans the whole of Shakespeare's dramatic career.

Such was the composition of the company of which Shakespeare was a member. How were its forces deployed in the actual operation of putting on a play?

For this our chief evidence is drawn from the surviving casts of six plays, plus one more that can be largely reconstructed from the prompt-book: eight lists in all, since for one play we have the casts of two distinct performances about ten years apart. These plays are Tarlton's *Seven Deadly Sins*, about 1590, almost before the company had taken shape; two performances of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, in 1613 and about 1623; Massinger's *Roman Actor* in 1626 and his *Picture* in 1629; Carlell's *Deserving Favourite*, also in 1629; Massinger's *Believe As You List* in 1631 (the prompt-book); and a revival of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Wild Goose Chase* in 1632. From a study of these lists, with some cross-reference to other plays, particularly in the Beaumont and Fletcher canon, in which the players are named but not assigned particular parts, Baldwin is able to make certain generalizations of which the following are the most notable:

1. All the prominent male parts are taken by sharers.
2. No female part is taken by a sharer, with one odd exception. To this I shall return.
3. The hired men took only minor parts.
4. The female parts are taken by apprentices.

These first four principles are all confirmed in the few surviving cast-lists for the Admiral's Men, the chief rival to the Shakespearian company. The remaining conclusions are slightly more subjective but I think can be accepted:

5. Each sharer played in at least one of the plays and several of them played in many. In other words the company contained no passengers.
6. Each master actor had a recognizable and consistent 'line': the juvenile lead, the rather older hero, dashing and gallant, the bluff soldier, the dignified ruler, the dapper schemer, and so on. This must be to some extent the practice in all repertory companies, which today still have their 'heavies' and their 'juvs'.
7. Where a straight character's physical characteristics are

described, as age, stature, colouring, they are those of the actor playing the part. There are, of course, exceptions to this: no one would maintain that for the actor of Lear we must find a player of four score and upwards; and if Pollard is a 'little fellow' in one play and a 'fat-guts' in the next we must remember that there is such a thing as padding. In general the rule seems to hold good.

Unfortunately there are no such lists for any of Shakespeare's plays. We can only guess at their casting by extending, forward and back, the 'lines' that, from the surviving lists, we know the actors played. Thus from the fact that John Lowin was Bosola we can be pretty sure that he played Iago; Pope, who we are told was a comedian, was the elderly soldier Arbactus in the *Seven Deadly Sins* and is therefore the obvious candidate for the part of Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost*. All too rarely such guesses are confirmed by contemporary allusions. Richard Burbage played a kingly hero, Gorboduc, in the *Seven Deadly Sins* and Ferdinand in the *Duchess of Malfi*. It is no surprise to learn that he took the tragic leads in *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear*.[1]

Some help is also given by the prompter's notes occasionally carried over into the printed copies of the plays. The most famous of these is 'Enter Kemp and Cowley' for Dogberry and Verges. Unluckily the prompter was seldom much exercised over the master actors; they could look after their own entrances. It was the hired men and walk-on parts that needed his supervision. Hence from this source we glean at best only such minor facts as that the singer of Balthasar's song in *Much Ado* was Jack Wilson, and that the gaunt Beadle in *Henry IV Part 2* was played by a hired man, John Sincler, who was also a Forester in *Henry VI* and a lord in the *Taming of the Shrew*.

Sometimes these prompter's notes are merely tantalizing. For instance, in the second part of *Henry IV* Falstaff entertains Doll Tearsheet at Mistress Quickly's tavern. Before we see these giants at play, we are told something about their carryings-on by two tavern-waiters. At the point where the waiters give place to their betters the Quarto text of 1600 inserts a bold stage-direction: 'Enter Will'. Now this may be one of two things: a first appearance for Falstaff, who would then enter before the ladies, but without speaking; or the entry of Mistress Quickly, the first of the new characters to speak. Some of those commen-

[1] *Diary of John Manningham 1602–3*, edited J. Bruce 1868, p. 39; 'An Elegie on the death of the famous actor Rich: Burbage', reprinted in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford 1923), vol. ii, p. 309.

tators, notably Dr. Dover Wilson, who prefer the first alternative, have gone on to conjecture whether the stage-direction is an indication that Falstaff was played by Will Kemp. I do not believe this is possible. Could the rustic buffoon, the mistaker of words, the 'clown' in the original sense that we see for certain in Dogberry and in Juliet's Nurse's Peter, and almost for certain in Launce and Costard and Gobbo—could this mooncalf measure up to Falstaff? Could even Bottom do it, if as a bonus we add Bottom to Kemp's list? The only other 'Will' among the master-actors is Sly, and he is almost equally unlikely. Besides the plain 'Will' seems rather too familiar an appellation for the prompter to apply to a master-actor, even if the master-actor was a clown. The apprentices, on the other hand, are constantly labelled by their Christian names. There was a 'Will', then very young, who played a boy's part in the *Seven Deadly Sins*. Can this Will Eccleston have been the creator of the part of Mistress Quickly? We cannot possibly tell.

This brings me to the apprentices, and the whole question of the playing of women's parts by boys. There have been critics who have found themselves quite unable to accept the idea of a boy Juliet, Lady Macbeth, or Cleopatra. Since no woman appeared on the English stage until Restoration times, the maturity such critics yearn for can only be supplied on the hypothesis that these women's parts were played not by boys but by adult men. As far as I know there are only four pieces of evidence that can possibly be made to support such a theory. First—a very slim piece—it is reported[1] in about 1602 that the Dowager Countess of Leicester had married 'one of the playing boys of the chappell'; but we may suspect a strong element of baby-snatching in that match. Second, when in 1610 Robert Keysar brought a suit against the King's Men, claiming damages for the loss of the use of the Blackfriars theatre transferred to them over his head, his main argument was that he had been forced to disband 'a companye of the moste exparte and skilful actors within the realme of England to the number of eighteane or twentye persons all or moste of them trayned vp in that service, in the raigne of the late Queene Elizabeth for ten yeares togeather and afterwardes preferred vnto her Maiesties service to be the Chilldren of her Revells'.[2] Must not

[1] *Letters of Philip Gawdy 1579–1616*, edited I. H. Jeayes, Roxburghe Club 1906, p. 117.

[2] *Keysar* v. *Burbadge and others*, reprinted by C. W. Wallace in *Nebraska University Studies* (1910), vol. x, p. 336.

players who have been under training for ten years be very distinctly adult? I think not. We shall see that an apprenticeship might easily last ten years or more. Third, there is the affair of Borne's gown. Three consecutive entries in Philip Henslowe's accounts for November–December 1597 record expenditure on stage costumes. In the first and the last entries it is a 'womones gowne', in the middle entry it is 'bornes gowne', and it is not unreasonable to suppose that all three are the same garment. Now 'Borne' was the alias or stage-name of a senior member of the Admiral's company, William Bird, and he has been claimed as the wearer of this woman's gown. Also in the company, however, was the apprentice, 'little Will Barne', who most certainly did play female parts; and since no reliance whatever can be placed on Elizabethan spelling, least of all on Henslowe's, the gown was much more probably little Will's.

The last evidence, and the only evidence with any solidity, is the prologue[1] written by Thomas Jordan for the performance of *Othello* in 1660 that was the vehicle for perhaps the first, certainly a very early, appearance of the genus actress on the English stage. He begins:

> I come, unknown to any of the rest
> To tell you news, I saw the Lady drest;
> The woman playes today, mistake me not,
> No Man in Gown, or Page in Petty-Coat;
> A Woman to my knowledge, yet I cann't
> (If I should dye) make Affidavit on't.
> Do you not twitter Gentlemen?

He then goes into a long disquisition, spun out with the most appalling puns, on the propriety of a woman appearing on the stage, and later resumes:

> But to the point, in this refining age
> We have intents to civilize the Stage.
> Our women are defective, and so siz'd
> You'd think they were some of the Guard disguiz'd
> For (to speak truth) men act, that are between
> Forty and fifty, Wenches of fifteen;
> With bone so large, and nerve so incomplyant,
> When you call Desdemona, enter Giant.

But Jordan was writing at a time when the whole system of training boys for the stage had been demolished by eighteen years of closed theatres, and in addition it was his job to dis-

[1] Thomas Jordan, *A Royal Album of Loyal Poesie* (1664), pp. 21–22.

parage the old and make the most of the new commodity his theatre had to offer, namely the actress. Certainly the boy-player in Hamlet is a *growing* boy, 'nearer to Heaven by the altitude of a chopine' than when Hamlet last saw him, and no man of forty.

Yet it would be equally dangerous to go to the other extreme and measure Shakespeare's boy actors by what is known of the children's companies. From Jonson's epitaph on Salathiel Pavy we know that this child joined the Chapel Royal at the age of ten and was a star actor when he died at thirteen. Note, however, that his speciality was old men. The Chapel children were playing not merely the women's parts but all the parts. They must have been more like a troupe of performing dogs than genuine actors, and their freakishness is emphasized in all the contemporary references to them.

What happened in the adult companies in the hey-day of the Jacobean theatre can be seen from the run of plays, whose cast-lists we possess, between 1623 and 1632. In the *Duchess of Malfi* the Duchess herself was played by Richard Sharp, and the seconda donna—the Cardinal's imperious mistress Julia—was John Thompson. As we shall see, there is some reason for thinking that Thompson was then fifteen. By 1626, the year of Massinger's *Roman Actor*, Thompson had taken over the lead, and his number two was John Honeyman, baptized 7 February 1612 and so presumably about fourteen at this time.[1] Smaller female parts were taken by Alexander Goffe, who we know was twelve,[2] and by William Trigg. The pattern is maintained in the 1629 plays, though the *Deserving Favourite* provides no parts for the younger pair. The prompt-book of *Believe As You List* (1631) is not very forthcoming about the female roles, but Honeyman, his voice presumably broken, has graduated to a small male part, and Thompson is out of it altogether. As in 1635 he is reported as having died,[3] he may have succumbed to the plague of 1630. In the 1632 revival of the *Wild Goose Chase* the chief women's parts have been taken over by Goffe, now eighteen, and Trigg. It is in this play that a senior member of the company, the clown John Shank, takes a woman's part, that of Petella, a waiting-woman in attendance on the two heroines. The odd thing about it is that this is a

[1] Baldwin, op. cit., p. 222.

[2] J. P. Collier, *Memoirs of the Principal Actors in the Plays of Shakespeare*, Shakespeare Society 1846, p. 266.

[3] 'Sharers' Papers', Halliwell-Phillips, op. cit., p. 316.

non-speaking part; and Baldwin suggests that the 'master' had originally adopted this means of being on stage in order to nurse his apprentices through their very exacting roles.

It looks then as if the apprentices began their acting careers, like the chapel children, at the age of ten or so, but in these adult companies were exercised for five years or more in smaller parts before they were considered fit to take a lead. Once trained, they continued for the period of apprenticeship (in trade legally seven years, but in the looser acting association anything from three to ten) or for as long as their voices remained uncracked and their stature not too monstrous. This might be quite a long time. Ezekiel Fenn and Theophilus Bird appeared in Christopher Beeston's company at the Cockpit in 1621, when they were apparently about ten. They were still playing female parts fourteen years later, but Bird at least took to doublet and hose soon after.[1]

Baldwin provides an amusing demonstration of the apprentice growing too big for his female boots. The heroine of Fletcher and Massinger's *Custom of the Country* (before 1622 and possibly as early as 1619) is described as 'a building of so goodly a proportion', that of Fletcher's *Island Princess* (before 1621) as 'of the strongest parts'; Oriana of the *Wild Goose Chase* (first performed 1621) is 'a tall woman, eighteen years of age', Violante of the *Spanish Curate* (1622) is 'a giantess', and Marcelia of Massinger's *Duke of Milan* (about 1623) is 'three foot too high for a woman'. The heroine of Fletcher and Rowley's *Maid in the Mill*, however, which belongs to the autumn of 1623, is only 'fifteen and upwards'. Thompson had evidently taken over from Sharp.

The third estate in the realm of the acting companies comprised the 'hired men', who between them covered all the odd jobs in the theatre. It is doubtful whether many of them were employed specifically as actors, for it is known that many of the walk-on and even the minor speaking parts were supplied by the musicians and by the stage and theatre staff. The surviving 'plot' or synopsis of *Frederick and Basilea*, played by the Admiral's Men in 1597, shows[2] that to provide jailers, confederates, and other supernumeraries the company even brought on stage the gatherers, who combined the functions of box-office clerk and usher, collecting the entrance penny at the

[1] Murray, op. cit. i. 236, note 3, 367, opposite 266.

[2] W. W. Greg, *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses* (Oxford, 1931), p. 126.

main door of the theatre and, at the doors of the galleries, the additional pennies payable for these more comfortable and distinguished positions. The Hope Theatre between 1613 and 1615 could muster at least nineteen of these gatherers who, their gathering completed, would be free to swell the stage crowd.[1]

The hired men did provide one very important functionary in the book-keeper. It was this man's job, when the poet delivered the completed 'book', to take it to the Revels Office to be passed by the censor, and he was responsible for seeing that any alterations demanded by the Master of the Revels were duly made in the book. He then saw to the copying out of the individual actors' parts; and since he was also prompter and call-boy he would enter in the book the memoranda that would enable him to have at hand at the right moment all the accessories, human and otherwise, without which the play could not run an uninterrupted course. It has been suggested that this factotum was also the Elizabethan equivalent of the modern producer or stage director; but I just do not believe that the leading actors, the masters of their craft, would have accepted direction from one of their own hired men. The Lord Chamberlain's company was, of course, unique in possessing its own resident poet, who was also a full member of the acting team. If anyone was called upon to pull the production of Shakespeare's plays into shape, the most likely and appropriate person for this task would have been the author; and it is not wildly extravagant to imagine that Hamlet's directions to the players reproduce what Shakespeare had actually said to his colleagues in rehearsal. Yet there is reason for thinking that under Elizabethan and Jacobean conditions the producer was much less necessary than he is now. Every evidence goes to show that the Elizabethan actors' technique was very much more automatic than anything we know today. Between players of their experience and training, a scene would quickly fall into a 'routine' (I use the word in no derogatory sense) and play itself.

What possible training, you may ask, could achieve this result and, incidentally, bring up a boy, even an eighteen-year-old boy, to the height of playing Cleopatra? The answer is, I believe, largely given in another neglected book, Dr. B. L. Joseph's monograph on Elizabethan acting.[2] No sixteenth-

[1] W. W. Greg, *Henslowe Papers* (London 1907), pp. 89, 110.

[2] B. L. Joseph, *Elizabethan Acting*, Oxford English Monographs 1951.

or seventeenth-century manual of acting survives, if it ever existed, but the age pullulates with books on rhetoric and, as Joseph points out, there is hardly an author touching on either subject, from Cornelius Agrippa *Of the Vanity and uncertainty of Arts and Sciences*, 1575, to Richard Flecknoe in *A short Discourse of the English Stage*, 1664, who does not instance the stage-players as exemplifying, albeit in a somewhat extreme form, the art of the rhetorician.

Now this was a highly formal art. The orator was trained not only to modulate his voice according to the nature of the sentiments he was expressing, but to accompany his words with appropriate movements of the body and especially of the hands. To discover what was appropriate he must seek opportunities of observing the natural behaviour of men under various emotions; but this behaviour must not be exactly copied, for it is the business of Art to distil the general out of the particulars of Nature. In his *Passions of the Mind* (1604)[1] Thomas Wright directs his orator to 'looke vpon other men appassionat, how they demeane themselves in passions, and observe what and how they speake in mirth, sadnesse, ire, feare, hope, &c. what motions are stirring in the eyes, hands, bodie, &c. And then leaue the excesse and exorbitant leuitie or other defects, and keepe the manner corrected with prudent mediocritie: and this the best may be marked in stage plaiers'.

On top of this technique of representation the orator must acquire the power of 'throwing' his voice, so as to reach the widest possible audience but without strain or the unnatural slowing up of his delivery. In these precepts we find exactly matched the opinion of Hamlet on acting, that it must hold a mirror up to nature, that speeches must not be mouthed but spoken trippingly on the tongue, that words must suit the action, and the action the words. This last injunction appears almost word for word in every rhetorical manual where gesture is being discussed, and it is to continuously appropriate gesture that Hamlet refers. His directions to the players are a warning not, as is sometimes supposed, against the oratorical style of acting, but against its exaggeration.

This rhetorical training had a part in every school curriculum of the age. We have memorials[2] of the practice of the most enlightened headmasters of Tudor times, such as Mulcaster at Merchant Taylors, Christopher Johnson at Winchester, Thomas

[1] Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind* (1604), p. 179.

[2] Joseph, op. cit., pp. 9–14.

Ashton at Shrewsbury, which show how much they valued not only declamation but play-acting as a training for both mind and body and how constantly they kept their pupils at these exercises. The professional appearances of the Children of Paul's and of the Chapel Royal were at first no more than a public display of a part of their normal school activities.

This then was the training that fitted the boy player to undertake the representation of a mature woman, this the context that made a skilled representation rather than any 'reliving of the part', acceptable. Indeed no actor, however mature, could have sustained the gruelling work imposed on the Elizabethan player unless he had been able to carry it largely on technique. Thanks to Philip Henslowe we have a list[1] of all the performances put on by Strange's men between 19 February and 22 June 1591–2. The company played normally six days a week (very occasionally five, sometimes seven, once or twice two plays in a single day) and in the eighteen weeks recorded twenty-two different plays were performed, four of them new productions. In the year between 3 June 1594 and the end of May 1595 the Admiral's company played almost without a break except for a five-week gap in Lent and in this time performed thirty-eight separate plays of which eighteen were new productions. The corresponding figures for the following twelvemonth, with a blank in July and most of August as well as the Lenten recess, were thirty-seven plays performed, of which seventeen were new and two revivals. In the third year's playing there was a long break between mid-July and the end of October but only a fortnight off in Lent: the number of different plays staged was again thirty-seven, with twenty new productions or revivals, five of them in a single month either side of Christmas. I will not guarantee these figures absolutely, for Henslowe is apt to list the same play under three different names each in a wide variety of spellings, and I cannot be sure of having unravelled all his multiplicities. They are accurate enough, however, to show that the Elizabethan companies accepted and maintained a programme that to anyone with experience of repertory must seem quite staggering, at least if it is remembered that there were no continuous 'runs', but a different play to be presented each day.

We must then conceive of the players for whom Shakespeare

[1] Henslowe's Diary, fols. 7, 8, 9–14, 15v, 21v, 25–27, Foakes and Rickert, op. cit., pp. 16–19, 21–34, 36, 37, 47–48, 54–58.

wrote as forming a closely knit and highly professional repertory company in which every member had his assigned place and function and a recognized routine by means of which he performed that function. The companies were, moreover, quite remarkably constant in personnel, for the reasons already given, and the leading actors must have appeared to their audiences as old friends. No spectator would be able to think of Kemp as anything but Kemp, whatever clownish name he might have assumed for the purpose of the play; and this must have been so even before Kemp achieved his fullest notoriety and, by morris-dancing all the way from London to Norwich, became the Dr. Barbara Moore of his age.

It follows, I think, that the plays were fitted to the company rather than the company to the plays. That this was the practice with the Admiral's Men appears from Henslowe's entries of payment for new plays. Thus early in December 1597 Ben Jonson showed the company the plot (that is a synopsis or even a rough draft) of a play that he promised to complete by Christmas, and thereupon received an advance of twenty shillings.[1] (With the characteristic doggedness that so often makes his diary amusing reading, Henslowe annotates the entry 'Lent . . . I saye lente in Redy money'.) There are also three entries recording the company's expenditure on refreshments at taverns where a completed play was read and approved before final payment was handed over. Furthermore, there survive notes written to Henslowe by two leading actors of the Admiral's company who seem at different times to have acted as agent for their fellows in the commissioning of new plays. On 8 November 1599 Robert Shaa writes: 'Mr Henshlowe we haue heard their booke and lyke yt their pryce is eight pounds, wch I pray pay now to mr wilson, according to our promysse, I would haue Come my selfe, but that I ame troubled wth a scytation.'[2] Samuel Rowley's note has the date 4 April 1601 on it and runs: 'Mr Hinchloe I haue harde fyve shetes of a playe of the Conqueste of the Indes & I dow not doute but It wyll be a verye good playe therefore I praye ye delyuer them fortye shyllynges In earneste of yt & take the papers Into yor one hands & on easter eue thaye promyse to make an ende of all the Reste.'[3] This particular play, by Day and Haughton, took much longer to shape or reshape than the authors anticipated,

[1] Henslowe's Diary, fol. 37v, Foakes and Rickert, op. cit., p. 73.

[2] Article 26 in Foakes and Rickert, op. cit., p. 288.

[3] Article 32 in Foakes and Rickert, op. cit., p. 294.

and if, as I suspect, the revision included a change of title, six further advances were called for before the final payment could be recorded on 6 June.

If the free-lance poets, who were not all mere theatre hacks for they included such respected names as Drayton and Jonson, were prepared as a matter of course to tailor their plays to a company of actors, how much more must we expect this to have been the practice of the tame poet, Shakespeare. He was himself an acting member of the company for which he wrote and knew by heart from the inside all the idiosyncrasies, the strengths, and the weaknesses of his partners. He could not help but visualize his Richard III in terms of the stage personality of Richard Burbage, or mentally try out the fusty inanities of Polonius in the all too familiar tones of, shall we say, 'old stuttering Hemings'. Critics have been too inclined to attribute changes in Shakespeare's style or ethos entirely to internal causes. I do not say that Shakespeare switched from comedy to tragedy solely because Burbage had developed into a superb tragic lead. The very quality of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear* shows that their author warmed to his task, that the writing of tragedy was proving congenial to him at that moment. The existence of Burbage is likely, nevertheless, to have provided the initial stimulus. In the same way the peculiar nature of the late romances, ascribed by critics either to a change of heart or to a change of theatre, must also owe something to the special capabilities of the actors, especially the apprentice actors, available in 1609 to 1612.

Or take Shakespeare's heroines in general—and here let me warn you that I am doffing my sober historian's gown and intend, for five minutes only, to wallow in conjecture. It is not, I may say, the first time that Shakespeare's heroines have inspired such conduct. I will make no reference to the early plays, for their dating is really too uncertain, but will begin with the mid-1590's. The comedies of that period share a very recognizable type of heroine, sprightly, buoyant, but with a deep underlying seriousness—Portia, Beatrice, Rosalind. I will maintain that not only are these three a single type, but that they manifest an increasing sophistication of the 'line'. Portia's gaieties with Nerissa are rather a put-up affair, a conscious display of fireworks; and her serious scenes are to be played absolutely straight, as if the actor could not compass grave and gay together. Beatrice's lines are rather more variegated, the wit more unforcedly witty, the passion, when it comes ('Kill

Claudio!'), more direct and deep. The part of Rosalind, however, which can plunge from gay to grave and back again in the twinkling of an eye, shows, in comparison with the other two, a virtuosity that is quite dazzling. In particular it has a quality of objectivity, of distancing, of self-ridicule almost but without any alienation of the audience's emotional sympathy, that is quite outside the compass of any but a very skilled, and a very confident, actor.

This heroine has a regular foil, small ('a little scrubbed boy'), and pert: Nerissa, Margaret, Celia. In two of the comedies a third apprentice appears as a very dark girl: Jessica, Phoebe. The other play, *Much Ado*, has two additional female roles, one, Hero, a very dumb blonde—surely a beginner's part. In the great history plays of the same period women have a lesser place, but I fancy I see something of Rosalind's lineaments in Lady Percy, and 'Nerissa' should have been capable of either Mistress Quickly or Doll.

At the turn of the century the old team disappears—indeed it is already gone from the last of the Histories, *Henry V*. *Julius Caesar* contains two very sedate ladies, almost as amateurish as Hero. It is of course a Roman play; but is it not possible that Shakespeare turned to a genre in which the chief quality required of the ladies was *gravitas* for the very reason that no apprentices were available who could exhibit any more lively quality? Troilus and Cressida is different again. Cassandra is as straight and serious a part as Brutus's Portia, but Helen is a brilliant thumbnail satire that requires very adroit playing, and Cressida—well, Cressida is a puzzle. And what of *Twelfth Night*? Olivia might have been played by the actor of Helen, or indeed of Cressida, but with Maria it almost appears as if the scrubbed boy has bounced back from the past. As for Viola, there are some who find this part and Rosalind's very similar, but I would bet my last penny against their having been written for the same actor. Viola, too, has her sophistication; but there is all the difference in the world between the tone of 'Alas the day! What shall I do with my doublet and hose?' and that of

> What will become of this? As I am man,
> My state is desperate for my master's love;
> As I am woman—now alas the day—
> What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!

And while the part of Rosalind crackles with femininity, that of Viola is the most simply boyish of all Shakespeare's heroines.

It would seem that about 1600 the apprentices' department of the Chamberlain's company was in a most unsettled state.

With Hamlet a new pattern begins to establish itself. There is a mature woman, Gertrude, and a singing ingenue, Ophelia. Neither part requires a very strong acting ability. Mad scenes are by no means as difficult to bring off as might appear, and Gertrude hardly ever takes the limelight, which in this play is concentrated on the 'fell opposites', Hamlet and Claudius. Gertrude has the set, rhetorical piece of the account of Ophelia's drowning, and the scene with Hamlet in the Queen's bedroom, but in this last it is Hamlet who makes all the running and Gertrude is required not so much to act as to react. In *Othello* there is again a singing heroine, Desdemona, and a mature woman, Emilia; in addition there is Bianca, a small part that nevertheless calls for considerable fire in the acting. In *Measure for Measure* the heroine is all fire—has 'Bianca' been promoted to the lead? For the singer has disappeared (Mariana is sung to, by a boy) and so has the mature woman, unless she has suffered a fate worse than death and been reduced to playing Mistress Overdone. I would guess that *Lear* (which contains no singer other than Armin the clown) and the succeeding plays illustrate the further fortunes of Bianca-Isabella, as Goneril, as Lady Macbeth (by no means so easy a part as is sometimes made out), and as Cleopatra. After that a second purely Roman play marks another low ebb in the affairs of the apprentices. But it is high time I returned to sobriety myself.

If, as I have suggested, Shakespeare's art was so much a function of his players' quality—by which I mean both their technique in itself and their skill in that technique—what implication has this for his interpreters today? It lands them, I believe, in an intolerable dilemma. On the one hand it reinforces the conviction that Shakespeare's work can only receive full display and full appreciation in a theatrical context; on the other it brings home the fact that nowhere in the English-speaking world today is it possible to find anything approaching the true context for which that work was designed. The bias of our actors is wholly towards a naturalistic style of playing. That is what English-speaking audiences at the moment expect, and they would be disturbed and offended by anything different. In Paris, perhaps, or Moscow, at the Vieux Colombier or the Mayakovsky, we may catch glimpses of what the artifice of the Elizabethan stage was like, but though the presentation may be right the object, in a foreign language, is necessarily blurred.

Occasionally a school performance has something of the genuine purity and coherence, but its formality is stiff where the Elizabethans' was supple, its directness awkward where the Elizabethans' was adroit.

In these circumstances there is some excuse for those who claim that the only theatre in which Shakespeare can be adequately presented is the theatre of the mind, and that, since his actual intentions cannot be realized, the proper course is to forget them and draw from the plays what seems most significant and most appropriate to our own times and to our own temper. As a reaction to the pedantry that would force upon us a Shakespeare purely Elizabethan, and so unintelligible, this is fair enough, but the extreme to which it tends is even more dangerous than its opposite. For it leads to a Shakespeare entirely subjective, indeed to as many Shakespeares as there are readers. If this process of disintegration has any limit at all, it would be a reading of the plays in which every effect is the exact opposite of that which the author intended. This would be a *reductio ad absurdum* that makes nonsense not only of any form of criticism but of the whole idea of communication, and on this slippery slope of subjectivism there is no logical holding-point, no reason why the interpreter, once embarked upon it, should not slide all the way to the bottom of absurdity.

I must admit that I cannot propose any ready solution to the dilemma, still less answer the questions, really metaphysical questions, that it raises. I will only suggest that what I have called the 'user' of Shakespeare should, in attempting to steer between the whirlpool of nonsense and the too-hard rocks of pure scholarship, fix his eye upon the one unaltering star, the nature of theatre itself. He will not, by concentrating exclusively on meaning and on verbal implications, over-simplify a structure that is maintained by a delicate balance between the three elements of sight, sound, and sense. He will not extract from the text subtleties so tortuous that they could never reach the consciousness of an audience through a medium as fast-moving and unhaltable as music, a medium that cannot even accommodate the double-take unless it is almost instantaneous. He will not forget that the material with which the dramatist works is as much the living personalities of his actors as the words he puts into their mouths.

Shakespeare was equally adept in the manipulation of both kinds of material. The irruption of the Porter into the murder-scene in Macbeth is a dramatic stroke requiring the greatest

delicacy of handling. If the contrast is too great it will break the back of the scene as a whole and kill it stone dead. Shakespeare knew that with the slipper-tongued, pseudo-philosophical, fantasticated foolery of Robert Armin he could bring off the irony; with the brasher clowning of William Kemp it would have been quite impracticable.

If then we cannot recall, or even reproduce, Shakespeare's players, let us at least not forget their existence. For without the players Shakespeare would not have been Shakespeare.