

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14826-9 - Shakespeare's Professional Skills
Nevill Coghill
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

SHAKESPEARE'S
PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14826-9 - Shakespeare's Professional Skills

Nevill Coghill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

SHAKESPEARE'S PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

BY

NEVILL COGHILL

*Merton Professor of English Literature in the
University of Oxford*



CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

1965

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14826-9 - Shakespeare's Professional Skills
Nevill Coghill
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521148269

© Cambridge University Press 1964

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1964
Reprinted 1965
First paperback printing 2010

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-04681-7 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-14826-9 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in
this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is,
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14826-9 - Shakespeare's Professional Skills
Nevill Coghill
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

FOR
HUGO DYSON
AND
PATRICK COGHILL

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
I VISUAL MEANING	I
II UNIFICATION	32
III JUXTAPOSITION OF SCENES	61
IV A PROLOGUE AND AN 'EPILOGUE'	78
V MORTE HECTOR: A MAP OF HONOUR	98
VI SOLILOQUY	128
VII REVISION AFTER PERFORMANCE	164
POSTSCRIPT	203
<i>Notes</i>	209
<i>Index of Names</i>	220

PLATES

(between pp. 104 and 105)

- I The Swan Theatre in 1596
- II The gallery of the Swan Theatre (detail)
- III A Roman Theatre, as imagined in the fifteenth century
- IV The Ascension and Pentecost, Fairford Church, Glos.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14826-9 - Shakespeare's Professional Skills
Nevill Coghill
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

He that hath not the craft, let him shut up shop.

GEORGE HERBERT, *Outlandish Proverbs*

PREFACE

De Stogumber. If you only saw what you think about you would think quite differently about it. It would give you a great shock.

(G. B. Shaw, *Epilogue to St Joan*)

These essays are based on the Clark Lectures for 1959, and I would first like to express my gratitude to the Master and Council of Trinity College for the honour they did me in asking me to deliver them.

They were addressed to an audience of scholars and students and so, mainly, is this book. At the same time I hope it may not be without appeal for less highly specialised lovers of Shakespeare, particularly for those interested in the ways in which his art as a poet is conditioned by his art as a writer for the theatre, and who enjoy studies in the use of a medium.

Shakespeare is known to have worked at extreme speed and, evidently, under an inconceivable pressure of spontaneous imagination. This is so richly evident in the dialogue of all his plays that the study of his imagery, after a generation of specialised scrutiny, still reaps harvest upon harvest of poetic discovery. I have not here attempted to discuss this aspect of his genius, knowing that it is already in many better hands than mine, and has been so for a long time, at least since the publication of Miss Spurgeon's remarkable book, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, that has influenced all study of Shakespeare since its first appearance in 1935.

Nor have I directly attempted the study of his sense of character, another aspect of supreme interest and importance in his dramaturgy, because an even longer line of striking critics, that began with Samuel Johnson and Maurice Morgann, and broke the new ground of introspection with S. T. Coleridge, has continued to illuminate it; this line of study may be thought to culminate in the work of A. C. Bradley, who shows a true understanding of the importance of character in the medium of theatre in his masterly *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904).

PREFACE

These two aspects—of verbal imagery and human character—may be thought of as wholly poetic, as if stemming from some instant, unargued, creative vision or impulse in Shakespeare; we find them both importantly in many great poets other than poets of the theatre; the aspect these essays attempt to discuss is less that which can be attributed to imagination, than that which we feel as the effect of a surpassing *intelligence* in him. What I am seeking to show, dispersedly among his plays, is the continual exercise of craftsmanlike understanding in his art, such as I think cannot be matched (save for flashes here and there) in the work of his contemporaries. He always seemed to know how to use, or to extend (by a kind of dramatic strategy) the resources at the disposal of a playwright.

To show this, I have attempted a series of analytical approaches, from the same starting-point, to the gulf between analysis and synthesis, to throw, with as much brinkmanship as I may have, some light across it.

My starting-point is how to tell a story on a stage, and this was also Shakespeare's primal starting-point, so far as one can tell; for he ransacked history and fiction for stories that could be made significant and told, or re-told, upon a stage. He was a supreme stage-story-teller and perceived that the basic source of all meaning that can be presented through this medium was the image of a human action.

Some actions are meaningful and others not, and some can be made meaningful, or more meaningful, by alterations in them, or by adding a second or a third to the first, in such a way that a complex of actions infiltrate into one another, to multiply the effects of meaning, whether by contrast or parallelism, or in other ways.

For an action—that is, the shape of a story—is in itself a declaration of the moral judgments it contains; it embodies and suggests them. I do not merely mean ethical judgments, but value judgments of all kinds, arising in, or put into question by the action itself. These values include (in the totality of the play) whatever the imagination and the intelligence can discover in its action.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14826-9 - Shakespeare's Professional Skills
Nevill Coghill
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PREFACE

An action is an outline and an analogy may be taken from other art. An outline drawing by a supreme draughtsman (a Watteau, a Picasso) contains and suggests modelling, texture, movement, even colour—many more things than are actually on the paper. The parables of Christ are outlines, worlds of imagination in a few sentences. There are no outlines in nature but there are plenty in art. The rightness of an outline is its pregnancy.

Stories have to be planned into plays. Shakespeare's plays are neither loose rambles, disguising their shapelessness under wild shows of blossom, nor are they tightly espaliered into 'Five-Act Form', the Unities and the *liaison des scènes*. Nevertheless they can be shown, in many places, to exhibit subtle calculations in structure, a seemingly magical care in the disposition of theatrical effect, for the sake of intensified significance.

I do not deny that there are puzzles, greater and smaller, here and there, in Shakespeare's dramaturgy, moments of seeming carelessness, signs of haste, evidences of faulty corrections, and even of failures in invention. But for all that I have been convinced, by the experience of trying to direct his plays, that they are often more subtly planned than is generally thought: that the scenes are designed, both internally and in relation to the play as a whole, with an intellectual power for which I can hardly find a parallel in other drama; to use Bottom's phrase, they 'grow to a point'. Their endless originality and variation is not haphazard but experimental. Like other great artists, Shakespeare was continually exploring and extending his medium.

That medium is no more than a stage with actors on it and a touch or two of scenery; yet it is the most convincing of all media for presenting our human situation. The medium of a painter (paint and canvas) allows him many things that are beyond the scope of theatre, landscape particularly, still-life, abstraction; but when he attempts a picture of human action or character, his battle-scenes and portraits cannot but be mute and static. So too the medium of the novelist has its special superiorities over that of the playwright: but print is only print, as paint is paint. Neither can have the immediacy of the stage in regard to human beings, for print and paint are

PREFACE

not the thing itself, as actors are. In the theatre men and women present men and women. It is an anthropomorphic art.

The questions with which I have armed myself have mostly been in terms of *function*, of bare dramatic analysis. Why is the story turned this way and not that? What is the use or point of this act, scene, speech, movement, gesture and so forth? Where are the climaxes and how are they approached and achieved? Why is this scene placed next to that? Why is there a soliloquy here and not there? To whom are soliloquies allowed? Is there an audience-craft as well as a stage-craft in Shakespeare?

These and others like them are questions that pour into the mind the moment one attempts a production. If there is any value in the answers I have tried to formulate, it is the result of this kind of work in the main, and I am deeply indebted to every company, amateur or professional, that I have worked with; and especially to the Oxford University Dramatic Society and to other university and college societies here and in America, whose contribution to the study of Shakespeare is of great consequence. No university can afford to be without this kind of work in continual progress. It can illuminate or call in question what is said in lectures or written in books, restore neglected plays to currency, and keep alive the simple but important idea that plays are written to be acted. How important that is we shall see.

Nevertheless, reading him privately will perhaps always be the main road to a knowledge of Shakespeare. In either approach (stage or study) desolating distortions can occur. I am not speaking of simple blunders (incompetent acting, ignorance of words) but, in the case of the stage, of distortions imposed by those directors whose pitiable ambition is to be 'different' (to use their phrase) whereas the true virtue and fountain of all originality in production is to be finely perceptive. The distortions of the study are mainly due to that lawlessness that can overtake an imagination that has forgotten the nature of the medium in which it is trying to imagine. To imagine continuously in three dimensions and in colour, in terms of human voices and bodies, is a considerable strain.

PREFACE

I say it is extremely difficult and tiring, when reading a play, to hold it in the mind's eye, and in the mind's ear, with any constancy, as it moves from moment to moment. It asks more concentration than most of us have to remember (for instance) while we are reading, what characters are on the stage, in what costumes and attitudes. The less we can do this, the more we are likely to lose important inflections of meaning. In a small scene, such as that between the Old Countess and Helena in the first act of *All's Well that Ends Well*, we may be able to visualise the two figures, both in their mourning black, each with her special grace—the graces of age and nobility and the grace of youth in love—the Countess seated, perhaps, with Helena kneeling at her side, and see their gestures and expressions, hear the tones of their talk as they flow through the dialogue, packing it with live meaning. But with more complex scenes, who can hold all their detail for long in his imagination, as the moods and movements change, while he reads?

It is false to reply that such visual details cannot carry important significances, as we shall soon see. The Elizabethans were certainly alive to some of them; they had whole systems of colour-symbolism in dress for instance, and a lover would, by wearing the colours of his mistress, 'carry on a silent conversation or flirtation with her';¹ it was an elaborate language, highly expressive. The instinct survives; this afternoon I saw a young man whose hair was dyed and styled to match precisely the dye and style of the hair of his girlfriend; they were walking hand in hand. It gave an effect of meaning that the eye could not miss, but eludes a full expression in words.

But it is generally not from our incapacities to visualise, that our worst distortions of Shakespeare come; it is from the lawlessness of our imaginations that we are in real danger; ingenious fancies, that lack the discipline of theatre, lead us into every kind of licentious speculation, even to wresting anti-Shakespearean meanings from his texts. Those, however, who are seeking Shakespeare's own meanings—an activity that seems legitimate and not entirely hopeless—can teach themselves, at least in some cases, to distinguish between an interpretation that has genuine Shakespearean validity,

PREFACE

and one that has it doubtfully, or not at all, by simply seeing if it could work on the stage; if not, it is a private fantasy.

Let us offer a swift example, taken from many years back, though it is still much quoted. In an essay on *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca*, by Mr T. S. Eliot, first published in 1927, he discusses Othello's last long speech, that begins:

Soft you; a word or two before you goe: (v, ii, 341)

This he considers an example of what he calls *Bovarysme* in the Moor; *Bovarysme* he defines as 'the human will to see things as they are not', a thing exemplified (he thinks) in a high degree in these lines, though generations of readers and playgoers have mistakenly thought the speech to express 'the greatness in defeat of a noble but erring nature'.

But Mr Eliot will not allow this consoling view to be the true burden of Othello's speech, for he takes it as that of a man 'endeavouring to escape from reality': Othello has 'ceased to think about Desdemona' to indulge in self-pity; what he is really doing is '*cheering himself up*' for the frightful mess his folly has made.

What happens to this interpretation when we try it out in a theatre? What tones of voice, what move or gesture, can an actor use to suggest a Bovarist cheering himself up? Would he not choose precisely those that would seem to be 'expressing the greatness in defeat of a noble nature'? For a true Bovarist at such a moment would attempt to see himself as doing exactly that. Unless it be argued that there is no such thing in nature as greatness in defeat and that any attempt to show it must be instantly recognised by all as fraudulent, how is an audience to know whether Othello is cheering himself up for being so gross a fool and failure, or whether he is cheering his audience up by showing once again, and at the last moment, a true flash of that nobility for which they had first honoured him?

The gravamen of the charge against such criticism is not simply that it is foot-loose from the art it is attempting to criticise, but that it implies a shocking technical incompetence, or else a shocking moral irresponsibility, in Shakespeare as a playwright. For if

PREFACE

Shakespeare had wished to convey the 'terrible exposure of human weakness' that Mr Eliot sees in Othello's speech, he could very easily have made this simple purpose plain, unless he was a bungler, or quite indifferent to the effect he was creating. For if Mr Eliot is right, the better this speech is spoken and acted, the more it must deceive the audience; and this is, in effect, conceded by Mr Eliot, who says Othello 'takes in the spectator'. It follows then, that what begins as an attack on Othello's character turns out as undermining Shakespeare's craftsmanship. In the pleasures of self-abasement and the denigration of heroism, many have welcomed Mr Eliot's views without noticing where they were leading, all for want of thinking in terms of the medium Shakespeare used.

It is pardonable for a *reader*, under the spell of Othello's speech, to have forgotten that Iago is still on stage and in full possession of his faculties. His hatred of Othello is undiminished. Had it been Shakespeare's intention to suggest what Mr Eliot supposes, Iago was there to assist him. Shakespeare had endowed him with the capacity to puncture sentiment; we have heard him use it on Roderigo:

Rodo. I cannot beleue that in her, she's full of most bless'd condition.
Iago. Bless'd figges-end. (II, i, 245-6)

What prevented Shakespeare, if he wished us to think ignobly of Othello's soul, from using Iago to guide our understanding to this crucial point? Iago had only to choose his moment in Othello's speech to ejaculate 'Thicklips!' or 'Buzze buzze!' (since, alas, the more sophisticated '*Bovarist!*' was not then available) to make his point. But the point was not made.

Under the discipline of theatre, then, the whole *Bovarist* conjecture collapses, like many other critical glosses on Shakespeare that have been offered without considering what can happen on a stage. An art moves in its own medium. Critics, like producers, must feel for the ways in which the plays they discuss were meant to *work*, both as a whole and in points of detail. These ways, or some of them, are the subject of this book.

It is customary and proper in a Preface to thank those who have

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14826-9 - Shakespeare's Professional Skills
Nevill Coghill
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PREFACE

helped the writer in studies of this kind, but I am under obligation to so many that I am unable to offer a manageable list. There is no idea here put forward that has not profited from the work of other people, over many years, in print, rehearsal, and conversation. It often happens that help of this kind becomes so much a part of one's own thinking that its true origin is forgotten. I have sought to record some of my indebtedness in the notes. I hope I have robbed no one by learning from him.