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Introduction

So much sex is readily apparent in Shakespeare that it might seem surprising that anyone should look for more. Virtually every play is shot through with sexual puns. The verbally fastidious fantasy of *Love's Labour's Lost* incorporates a passage (4.1.124–38) so indelicate that it might raise a blush on the cheek of many a modern playwright. In *Romeo and Juliet* the lovers' romance is counterpointed by the earthiness of the Nurse and the witty bawdy of Mercutio. In both parts of *Henry IV* and in *Pericles* scenes are set in brothels. The Vienna of *Measure for Measure* teems with lechery and vice. Yet modern critics continue to comb the plays for more, to seek out sexuality in previously unsuspected places and to attribute indecent meanings to characters who might, if they were able to react, be aghast to know of them. In the theatre, lewd meanings have been sought out, relationships once thought to be innocent have been trawled for sexual undertones, and both the comic and the serious aspects of sexual behaviour have been stressed in ways that shift the interpretative balance of the plays in which they occur.

The phenomenon extends to the poems, too. The eroticism of *Venus and Adonis* that helped to make it so popular among Shakespeare's contemporaries has been emphasized and reinterpreted in lurid ways by practitioners of gender studies and of what has come to be known as queer theory. And sexual readings of the sonnets have provoked reassessment

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not only of the poems themselves but of Shakespeare's own sexuality.

Though it is natural to ask whether things have gone too far, it is no part of my intention in this book to deny the legitimacy of fresh explorations of Shakespeare's rich, abundant and often comic celebration of the many and varied aspects of human sexuality. Nor do I seek to question the right of the theatre to reappropriate the plays as documents that can reflect the concerns of modern society even if, while doing so, it attributes to them meanings that Shakespeare could not have envisaged. But I do want to increase self-consciousness about precisely what we are doing as both readers and performers.

My first chapter, 'Lewd interpreters', focuses on scholarly, theatrical and critical interpretations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in an attempt to distinguish legitimate readings-between-the-lines from over-readings that are ahistorical and sometimes untheatrical in imposing upon the texts meanings that must originate rather in the minds of the interpreters than of the dramatist. When, it asks, do sexual interpretations proceed from what would once have been considered the 'dirty minds' of the interpreters rather than from the imaginations of the dramatist and of his early audiences? Many relationships in Shakespeare's plays may be, but are not necessarily, sexual. Did Hamlet go to bed with Ophelia, as he visibly does in Kenneth Branagh's film? ('Invariably, in *my* company' is said to have been the reaction to this question of some actor-manager of the past.) Was Gertrude Claudius's lover before her husband's death? And is Bottom to be assumed to have sex with Titania?

The idea that some readings are more legitimate than others raises fundamental questions about theatrical interpretation.

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The meanings of works of art are stimulated and guided by the mind of the artist but exist finally only in the minds of those who experience them. The performative arts are peculiarly susceptible to variation because, while they do not truly live until they are performed, each performance is a palimpsest created by the interaction between the written text, its lived realization, and its audience. Even in our own time, let alone with works from the past, authors have no ultimate control over the ways in which their work is realized. Directors, designers, actors and all the other personnel involved in the creation of the theatrical experience help to shape its impact, making each performance a unique event. The experience will differ according to the composition of the audience. To put it at its simplest, a production of *King Lear* given in an old people's home would make a very different impact from one given before an audience of primary school children. *Measure for Measure* would strike a Muslim audience differently from a Christian one.[1] In 1989 Mark Rylance, working with a psychiatrist, Dr Murray Cox, performed *Hamlet* to an audience of patients at Broadmoor which included serial murderers. The result was transformational for both actors and audience.[2]

Productions will affect individual members of an audience in different ways, too. Shakespeare knew this: Hamlet could rightly calculate that a representation of the murder of Gonzago would cause Claudius to react in a different way from, say, Ophelia or Horatio. In modern audiences, a twin might feel special sympathy with Viola and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* or with the Antipholuses and Dromios in *The Comedy of Errors*. *The Merchant of Venice* has inevitably proved especially sensitive to predominantly Jewish audiences. And, to take circumstances

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that are relevant especially to the third of these chapters, the sexual orientation of individual spectators will affect their reactions. Lesbians might be especially interested in the relationship between Celia and Rosalind in *As You Like It* or in the characterization of Emilia in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*; the same play portrays in its title characters a pair of men to whom male homosexuals might respond with special sympathy. In a dialogue full of erotic intensity, Arcite, alone in prison with Palamon, says 'We are one another's wife, ever begetting / New births of love'; a little later Palamon asks 'Is there record of any two that loved / Better than we do, Arcite?'

> ARCITE Sure there cannot.
> PALAMON
> I do not think it possible our friendship
> Should ever leave us.
> ARCITE Till our deaths it cannot,
> And after death our spirits shall be led
> To those that love eternally. (2.2.80–115)

But even as they speak, Emilia, with whom they are both about to fall in love, comes upon the scene.

The personality, physique and costuming of the performers, too, will have sexual implications. Directors have been known to ensure that actors – male or female – with especially charismatic sexual appeal appear in a state of semi-, or even total, nudity at some point in their productions. It has become common to experiment with cross-dressing, testing the implications of casting males in female roles – as invariably happened in the original performances – and females in male roles. When a male actor known to be homosexual plays Richard II, his relationship with his favourites and with Aumerle is liable to take on special significance. In Ian Judge's Stratford production of *Troilus*

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and Cressida (1996) the leather costumes and bared buttocks of the Grecian warriors were inescapably homoerotic in their implications.

Variability of interpretation in sexual as in other respects is enhanced by the fact that plays – unlike, say, novels or poems – are peculiarly susceptible to textual alteration. Sometimes this may be for practical reasons, to do for example with availability of actors, desired length of performance, textual obscurity and even censorship. But it may also result, whether consciously or not, from a desire to promulgate specific points of interpretation. In the past censorship was commonly practised, reducing or eliminating the overt sexuality of passages such as the opening dialogue of the servants in *Romeo and Juliet*, the conversation on virginity between Helen and Paroles in *All's Well that Ends Well*, or Leontes's sexual delusions in *The Winter's Tale*. Since the sixties it has been common to emphasize sexuality or to seek it out where it had not previously been suspected. Not many directors nowadays add lines, but abbreviation is common and may slew the direction of the play in significant ways. Choice of setting, costume, and stage business can transform a scene. In Gregory Doran's production of *Timon of Athens* (Stratford, 1999) the masque, previously often used for a display of heterosexual lasciviousness, became a homosexual festival. As John Jowett writes,

> Doran's Cupidesque 'Amazons' were played by men wearing thongs and little black masks and large white feather wings. They descended from aloft to the accompaniment of [Duke] Ellington's music, firing flirtatious arrows from silly bows at Timon's guests, then taking partners in an all-male dance . . . Doran introduced a violent homoerotic mime sequence in which one of the male dancers in the masque flirted with

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1. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.1: Titania (Stella Gonet) prepares Bottom (Desmond Barrit) for his journey to her bower in Adrian Noble's production, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 1994

> Alcibiades' soldier but rejected him when he made a pass at him at the end of Sc. 2; the disgruntled soldier later stabbed the dancer and killed him.[3]

All this was achieved with no change to the text.

Less extensive use of body language and stage business can play its part (Fig. 1). In Adrian Noble's 1994 Stratford production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Titania beckoned Bottom into the large upturned umbrella that represented her bower, and as it ascended we were treated to the sight of Desmond Barrit's ample posterior lunging energetically up and down in a manner that

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left no doubt about the relationship between the weaver and the Fairy Queen. The intonation of a single word can do its work: in Michael Boyd's Stratford production of the same play (1999), Titania's offer of a 'venturous fairy' to bring Bottom 'new nuts' unmistakably conveyed (to most members of the audience) the sense 'testicles'. And even a silence can carry innuendo. In the same play, Bottom, waking from his dream, says 'Methought I was – there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had – but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had' (4.1.8–11). The innocent interpretation of 'Methought I had' is 'I thought I had ass's ears.' But, again in Noble's production, Barrit filled in the silence between 'methought I had' and 'but man is but a patched fool . . .' by peering down his pants in a manner that recalled to some members of the audience Jan Kott's remark that 'Since antiquity and up to the Renaissance the ass was credited with the strongest sexual potency and among all the quadrupeds is supposed to have the longest and hardest phallus.'[4]

Inevitably these and similar interpretative decisions raise questions of legitimacy. Is it right to convey significances that could not have been in the mind of the author as he wrote? Is it, on the other hand, impossible to deny them? How free can we be in our handling of texts from the past? Nahum Tate's drastically adapted version of *King Lear* (1681) and Colley Cibber's of *Richard III* (1700) are now usually mentioned only to be derided, but are they all that different in kind from adaptation achieved rather by production devices than by textual changes? Might it be argued that a director working for a subsidized company much patronized by schoolchildren who are studying a text for examination purposes has a duty to present that text with a minimum of mediation? Or conversely, is it more important to display the

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full range of what may result from the interplay between a creative imagination of the past and an interpretative imagination of the present? Where does interpretation end and re-creation – or, to use a less favourable term, distortion – begin? There are no absolute answers to these questions, but it is healthy to raise them.

Writings meant to be read rather than performed are also, if to a lesser degree, subject to fluctuating interpretation. Shakespeare's sonnets, considered in the second of these chapters, are the subject of an ongoing controversy about their sexual implications. In them, Shakespeare defies convention by idealizing male love objects and deploring his sexual entanglement with a female. Are those sonnets that are addressed to and concerned with a young man purely platonic in their orientation, reflections of a lost Renaissance ideal of non-sexual friendship, or do they imply same-sex desire? If so, are we to assume that the desire was reciprocated? And, beyond this, was it consummated?

Of greater interest still in relation to Shakespeare's biography, do the sonnets reflect his personal experience? Was he himself 'in love' with a man – or with more than one young man? Do the sonnets imply same-sex desire in the author, or are they rather quasi-dramatic projections of the imagination of a writer who had a consummate ability to imagine himself into minds different from his own? The second chapter in this book addresses these questions in part by looking at Shakespeare's collection in relation to other sonnet sequences of his time. It does not attempt to deny that poems, like plays, may provoke varying reactions in the great variety of readers. Critics of the past tended homophobically to resist any notion that Shakespeare could have portrayed sexuality in the relationship between the poet – or his persona – and the young man (or men) whom he addresses. More recent readers

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may have swung too far in the opposite direction in their efforts to present a liberated Shakespeare. Or, by expressing what these poems mean to them, these readers may simply show that the reading of poems, like the performing of plays, involves creative interaction between the words on the page and the sensibility that apprehends them.

The third chapter considers to what extent the plays can be interpreted as portraying sexual relationships between men. On the surface, they scarcely do so. They were written at a time when sodomy was a capital offence. Few plays of the period directly portray homosexual relationships (the most obvious and best-known example of one that does is Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*). But such relationships existed in real life – King James I himself was notorious for his conduct with his favourites. From the beginnings of Shakespeare's career, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, to the end of it, in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, his plays are full of close, loving, even passionate male friendships. In avoiding explicit sexuality, was Shakespeare merely keeping himself out of trouble? How legitimate is it to read sex between the lines? When did the theatre and readers start to make homosexual interpretations explicit? What is the relationship between critical interpretation and theatrical projection of homosexuality in the plays? These and other questions are addressed by way of a survey of homosexual interpretations on page and stage.

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CHAPTER ONE

Lewd interpreters

'Fie, what a question's that / If thou wert near a lewd interpreter!' says Portia to Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice* after Nerissa has asked 'shall we turn to men?' (3.4.79–81). In these words Shakespeare unambiguously draws his audience's attention to a bawdy double meaning. In his time that phrase – double meaning – seems not to have been used in its modern sense – what the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) calls 'the use of an ambiguous word or phrase . . . to convey an indelicate meaning', but rather to have harked back to the ambiguous responses of the Delphic oracle, as in *All's Well that Ends Well*, where Bertram says that Paroles has deceived him 'like a double-meaning prophesier' (4.3.102–3). The nearest Shakespeare comes to using the sense for which we, if we are to make ourselves entirely clear, use the significantly French phrase 'double entendre' is in *Much Ado About Nothing*, when Benedick sets about interpreting Beatrice's words 'Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner': 'Ha! "Against my will I am sent to bid you come in to dinner". There's a double meaning in that' (2.3.235–46). And the French 'double entendre' is not recorded as an anglicism before 1673. Nevertheless, indecent – or, to use a slightly less loaded term, sexually suggestive – double meanings abound in Shakespeare's plays, and in both the dramatic and the non-dramatic literature of his time.

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