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Edited by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton

Excerpt

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I

GARY TAYLOR

Shakespeare plays on Renaissance stages

The business of playing

Shakespeare's plays were born on stage. They might have been conceived 'In the quick forge and working-house of thought', but for Shakespeare that house where you should 'Work, work, your thoughts' was itself a playhouse (*Henry V* 5.0.23, 3.0.25). Shakespeare did his thinking in theatres. 'My muse labours', Shakespeare wrote, 'and thus she is delivered', Iago says, enacting thought, the actor delivering his line as the character delivers his rhyme (*Othello* 2.1.126–7). What the muse conceives is not properly born until it cries out, giving voice to what had before been only 'bare imagination' (*Richard II* 1.3.296). So it should not surprise us that Shakespeare imagined being 'born' as an entrance onto 'this great stage' (*Tragedy of King Lear* 4.5.175). That metaphor depended, in part, upon the Latin motto of the Globe Theatre, '*Totus mundus agit histrionem*' (translated in *As You Like It* as 'All the world's a stage'). But it also reflected Shakespeare's own frequent association of the womb that delivers newborn babes with the theatre that delivers newborn plays. He compares the walls of a circular amphitheatre to a 'girdle', encompassing a 'pit' that is also an 'O' (*Henry V* Pro. 19, 11, 13); he imagines a 'concave womb' echoing with words (*Lover's Complaint* 1), and asserts that a 'hollow womb resounds' (*Venus* 268), as though a uterus were a resonating auditorium. Such associations subordinate female anatomy to the emotional and professional experience of a male actor and playwright. That is why, when the Princess of France anticipates the projected show of Nine Worthies, she says that 'great things labouring perish in their birth' (*Love's Labour's Lost* 5.2.517): she equates performance with parturition. So does Shakespeare.

Consequently, we mislead ourselves if we imagine a play moving *from* text *to* stage, as though textuality and theatricality were separate entities, or as though one evolved into the other. For Shakespeare, a play began life in the theatre. Often enough, the stage itself inspired composition of the text.

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A character like Pistol, sampling from old plays, literally embodies memories of treasured theatrical performances; at the same time, he probably parodies the vocal and physical style of the first great English actor, Edward Alleyn. *The Merchant of Venice* – which also went by the now less familiar title ‘*The Jew of Venice*’ – remembers and rewrites *The Jew of Malta*, for years one of the most popular plays in the repertory of a rival company, led by Alleyn; Shakespeare’s familiarity with Christopher Marlowe’s play can only have come from performances, because it was not printed until 1633. Likewise, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* responds to Henry Porter’s *The Two Angry Women of Abington*, a recent hit play performed by the same rival company, and not available in print at the time. Many of Shakespeare’s histories, not to mention *Hamlet*, rewrite successful plays of the 1580s. His final comedies, from *All’s Well That Ends Well* to *The Tempest*, self-consciously reject the innovative genres of city comedy perfected by Thomas Middleton and John Marston in plays for the Jacobean children’s companies; Shakespeare and his aging fellow-actors instead mined nostalgia, resurrecting and reshaping Elizabethan dramatic romances.

Shakespeare, as these examples suggest, was writing not only for himself but for a particular acting company, and against their chief commercial rivals. The Chamberlain’s Men – in 1603 rechristened the King’s Men – was a joint-stock company, co-owned by its chief actors who, like modern stockholders, received proportionate shares of its profits. From 1594 until his retirement in 1613, Shakespeare worked, as actor and playwright, with the company that he part-owned; in 1599 he also became a shareholder in that company’s open-air suburban amphitheatre, the Globe; in 1608, he became a shareholder in their indoor theatre at Blackfriars. In writing plays Shakespeare was deeply invested, emotionally and financially, in the success of that company.

Unfortunately, we have no record of that company’s day-to-day procedures, no financial accounts or personal memoirs. Nevertheless, a lot of circumstantial evidence suggests that its operations resembled those of other companies. For instance, Philip Henslowe, the entrepreneur personally and financially associated with Edward Alleyn and the Admiral’s Men, regularly recorded advance payments to playwrights. The playwright presented to the acting company a ‘plot’, or scene-by-scene scenario of a prospective play; if the company approved, they would offer the playwright a down payment, and might make subsequent part payments as he completed parts of the play. Such a routine gave the acting company a voice in the evolution of each script, almost from its outset. Every play was conceived and executed as a corporate capital venture. That was as true of Shakespeare’s plays for the Chamberlain’s Men, as of Thomas Dekker’s plays for the Admiral’s Men. But every play also depended upon, and reinforced, a network of

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personal relationships; in Shakespeare's case some of those relationships were mutually rewarding enough to last decades. In choosing which plays to write, or when to write them, or what kinds of roles to put into them, he must have taken some account of the attitudes and aptitudes of his fellow-sharers.

Playwrighting in these circumstances was an intrinsically social process. Considerably more than half of the known plays of the period were written by more than one playwright. The business of playwrighting often resembled the apprentice–master relationship that structured London trades (and the training of boy actors by an adult veteran). Thus, early in his career Shakespeare apparently collaborated with Thomas Nashe and others in writing *The First Part of Henry the Sixth*, and with George Peele in writing *Titus Andronicus*; *Edward the Third* may also be an early collaboration. For a decade after the formation of the Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare – perhaps stung by Robert Greene's bitter attack on him, in 1592, as a thief of better men's talent – chose not to team up with other playwrights. But in 1605 he began collaborating again, first with Middleton on *Timon of Athens*, then with George Wilkins on *Pericles*, finally with John Fletcher on *Henry VIII* (or *All is True*), *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and the lost *Cardenio*. In each case the middle-aged Shakespeare teamed up with a young man who had already successfully captured the new public mood. Such partnerships not only paired individuals; they created a dialogue across generations and theatrical fashions.

To say that early modern plays were masterpieces written by committees would be an exaggeration, but the exaggeration came close enough to the truth that Ben Jonson felt the need to insist rebelliously upon individuality and independence. Shakespeare, by contrast, was a company man. The earliest editions of his plays specified the company that performed them, but no author; not until 1598, with the quarto of *Love's Labour's Lost*, did his name reach the title page. After 1598, plays continued to appear with the company's name, but not his (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1599; *Henry V*, 1600), and the 1623 collection of his *Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies* was prefaced and dedicated and probably edited by two of his old colleagues, fellow-shareholders in the Chamberlain's/King's Men. Even when he was not teamed with another author, Shakespeare was always writing for and with a specific company of actors, and what we call 'his' plays were at the time often considered 'theirs', or both 'his' and 'theirs'. After all, Shakespeare was, in the technical terminology of the period, a 'sharer', the part-owner of a collaborative enterprise; 'Property was thus appalled' by a creative corporation of 'Two distincts, division none' (*Phoenix and Turtle* 37, 27).

The earliest texts of his plays are, accordingly, frustrating documents; reading them is like overhearing someone carrying on an argument with himself,

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half-vocalised, or listening to one half of a telephone conversation, or trying to follow the elliptical dialogue of twins. Unlike Jonson's plays, or some of Middleton's, Shakespeare's were not printed from manuscripts prepared for the convenience of that consortium of readers called 'the general public'; instead, they were written to be read by a particular group of actors, his professional colleagues and personal friends. He could rely on those readers to bring to their reading much specialist knowledge about theatrical conditions and working practices, and the circumstances of the specific company to which they and he belonged. The written text of any such manuscript thus depended upon an unwritten paratext, which always accompanied it; an invisible life-support system of stage directions, which Shakespeare could either expect his first readers to supply, or which those first readers would expect Shakespeare himself to supply orally. For instance, not a single sixteenth- or seventeenth-century printed text of a Shakespeare play indicates every necessary exit; indeed, even the surviving manuscript promptbooks for the King's Men do not indicate every necessary exit, or the costumes worn by most of the characters. Sometimes the texts do not specify who sings a song, or which song they sing.

Actors who enter must exit, every actor must wear (or not wear) something, every word sung on stage must be sung by someone, and every singer must have words to sing. Exits and costumes and speech attributions and song texts are necessary elements of even the most minimal performance script. Shakespeare's texts, nevertheless, uniformly fail to supply such minimal information. Why? Because Shakespeare expected his fellow-actors to fill in those obvious blanks. That is, he expected parts of the minimal performance script to be 'written' by the actors with whom he was collaborating.

Casting and doubling

Because Shakespeare expected his words to be spoken by actors and heard by audiences, each text is a score for lost voices. He composed roles for the tone and range of the particular human instruments who would perform them. Richard Burbage (like Edward Alleyn) had an exceptionally capacious memory, which meant that playwrights could write for him some taxingly long parts, longer than any parts written for any European actor before 1590: Burbage certainly played Richard III, Hamlet, and Othello (as well as Marston's Malevole and Jonson's Mosca), and probably also first embodied Henry V, Duke Vincentio, and Antony (as well as Middleton's Vindice). These parts not only give a single character thousands of words to speak; they also demand, and enable, an exceptional variety of emotional and vocal display. Burbage was the company's leading actor, and stayed with

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it even after Shakespeare retired; by contrast, the company's first clown, Will Kemp, left in 1598, to be replaced by Robert Armin. Shakespeare's clowning changed to suit the more intellectual and musical gifts of the new resident comedian. Likewise, as Burbage aged, Shakespeare's leading characters got older: much is made of the age gap between the young Desdemona and the aging Othello, grey-haired Antony is contrasted with the young Octavius, Lear is 'fourscore and upward' (*King Lear* 4.6.58). The only long role for a conspicuously young protagonist in Shakespeare's late plays is Coriolanus, but that might have been played by the rising star John Lowin, who is known on other occasions to have played soldiers. Certainly, when Lowin joined the company, the King's Men began to perform plays which contained not one but two long and complex parts, of a kind hitherto limited to Burbage. The combination of Burbage and Lowin made possible a sustained binary opposition of two strong characters, which in turn shaped the structure of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604), Jonson's *Volpone* (1606), and Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610).

More generally, Shakespeare and every other professional playwright designed their scripts to suit a certain size and shape of acting company. In the 1580s and early 1590s, when the Queen's Men set a standard their competitors felt they had to match, Shakespeare was not alone in writing plays that – even allowing for doubling – require exceptionally large casts (all three plays on Henry the Sixth, *Titus Andronicus*). But after the break-up and reorganisation of companies caused by the severe outbreak of plague and subsequent long closure of the London theatres in 1592–3, playwrights began composing for leaner troupes: Shakespeare's later history plays consistently require fewer actors than the early ones.

In plotting and writing all his plays, early and late, Shakespeare would have assumed that some actors would play more than one role. As Costard announces in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the traditional 'Nine Worthies' will become, in their performance, 'three Worthies', because 'everyone pursents three' (5.2.486–8): each actor plays three parts. Likewise, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom, having already been given the role of Pyramus, suggests 'let me play Thisbe too', and 'Let me play the lion too' (1.2.42, 57; my italics): of course this histrionic self-aggrandisement amusingly characterises Bottom, but it also draws upon a widespread sixteenth-century tradition of character-doubling. From the evidence of surviving cast lists and theatrical documents from the 1580s to the 1630s, in the professional London companies actors playing the lead parts in a play did not (normally) double, and those playing young female characters did not (normally) play adult male characters too; most of the doubling (normally) involved adult male or female secondary characters, with relatively few lines. These casting practices probably

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explain, for instance, why so many of the secondary characters in the first half of *Julius Caesar* do not resurface in the second half, why some characters materialise only in the first scene of a play (Francisco in *Hamlet*, Archidamus in *The Winter's Tale*), and why in *1 Henry IV* Poins consistently and conspicuously appears alongside Prince Hal in 1.2, 2.2, and 2.4 – and never again.

Even when it seems clear that Shakespeare structured a play with doubling requirements in mind, we often cannot tell which specific roles were doubled in early performances, because several different possibilities present themselves. The actor playing Poins could have doubled as the Earl of Douglas or as Sir Richard Vernon, both of whom first appear in 4.1 (thus explaining why Poins has no role in the immediately preceding 3.3, the first tavern scene from which he is absent). Further uncertainty is created by our ignorance about how much time actors needed to switch roles: early documents from the professional theatres seem to allow at least one intervening scene for such changes, but in practice experienced actors have always been able to switch very quickly, and both actors and audiences sometimes enjoy such feats of virtuosity. Indeed, as Bottom's enthusiasm for engrossing extra roles suggests, actors sometimes enjoy playing more than one character, precisely because doing so permits them to display their shape-changing virtuosity. When the King's Men presented *Cymbeline*, if one actor played both the despicably ridiculous Cloten and his rival, the romantic and almost tragic hero Posthumus, both the actor and the audience might have enjoyed the yoking of such incongruities – and recognised a further level of complexity in the already complex moment when a headless corpse (actually, of the despised Cloten) is mistaken for the beloved Posthumus.

But major roles were not normally doubled, and we can be more confident about early doubling when the roles affected are smaller. The actors who impersonated one foursome of small parts (Flute, Snout, Starveling and Snug) almost certainly also impersonated another foursome of small parts (Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed). Likewise, in both versions of *King Lear* the actor playing Cordelia might also have played the Fool. Both are secondary characters, with relatively few lines. The Fool first appears in 1.4, and last appears in 3.6; Cordelia is prominent in the first scene, then disappears until 4.3; the two characters are psychologically conflated in Lear's 'And my poor fool is hanged' (5.3.279).

Acting gender, acting race

Cordelia is female, and the Fool male, but on early modern stages both parts would have been played by the same kind of actor. There were no actresses in Shakespeare's company; instead, female roles were played by

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boys, young males a few years either side of puberty. Those same talented youngsters also played the many young boy characters who appear in early modern plays. Shakespeare's *dramatis personae* include more boys than any other major body of drama: Sir John's page in *2 Henry IV*, *Merry Wives* and *Henry V*, one 'young Lucius' in *Titus* and another in *Caesar*, young Martius in *Coriolanus*, William Page in *Merry Wives*, and many anonymous pages in other plays. Like modern choirboys, the performing boys of early modern England were often trained to sing; indeed, the acting company associated with St Paul's Cathedral, which flourished in the 1580s and again from 1600 to 1606, originated as an ensemble of choirboys. Consequently, Shakespeare's boy characters are often also expected to sing. Sometimes – like the two anonymous singing pages in *As You Like It*, or the anonymous singing boys in *Measure for Measure*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* – singing is the sole excuse for their existence. But John Lyly, in plays written for Paul's Boys in the 1580s, had also demonstrated the theatrical appeal of putting into the mouths of babes incongruously clever worldly-wise speeches, and many of the roles Shakespeare wrote for boys copy that convention. Armado's page in *Love's Labour's Lost* epitomises such roles: Mote's name alludes both to his small size and to the French word *mot* (word), and he is introduced as a 'tender juvenal' (1.2.8–15), both a soft-skinned juvenile and an oxymoronic 'compassionate satirist' (alluding to the Roman poet Juvenal).

The same boy actors who were trained to display extraordinary verbal legerdemain were also able, on other occasions, to be simply innocent: harmless, helpless, naïve and tragically vulnerable. The death of a child is likely to loosen the tear ducts of even the toughest spectator. Shakespeare often used boys as uncomplicated pathetic victims: Rutland in *3 Henry VI*, Prince Edward in *Richard III*, Arthur in *King John*. Sometimes – with the young Duke of York in *Richard III*, or MacDuff's son in *Macbeth*, or Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale* – Shakespeare united in one role the witty page and the pathetic victim: the boy actor first makes spectators laugh with precociously sophisticated wordplay, and then with his premature death makes spectators weep.

The boy actor who played Hermione's young son Mamillius could also have played, in the second half of the play, Hermione's daughter Perdita – thus reuniting, in the harmonies of the play's ending, mother and lost child. Even when combined, the two roles would require a boy actor to memorise only 1,046 words, much less than either Hermione (1,580) or Paulina (2,372). We cannot be absolutely sure that the King's Men doubled Mamillius and Perdita, but we can say that the King's Men expected their young apprentices to play both boys (like Mamillius) and young women (like Perdita),

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and also that Shakespeare, thinking theatrically, wrote *The Winter's Tale* in a way that allowed, and in some ways seems to encourage, that particular doubling of roles. We can say the same about the doubling of Lear's Fool with Cordelia. Lear's Fool, as the dialogue ten times insists, is a 'boy', and he displays the wit and irreverence characteristic of Shakespeare's many young pages. The vicarious precocious Fool makes us laugh; the innocent dead Cordelia makes us cry. Both roles combine affection for Lear with criticism of him, and both were well within the range of a trained boy actor.

Because Shakespeare expected the same performers to represent boys and women, the roles he created for women resemble the roles he created for boys. Indeed, he routinely regarded the two identities as interchangeable: beginning in what was probably his first play, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, he had Julia disguise herself as a young page, and later he scripted similar transformations for Portia, Nerissa, Rosalind, Viola and Innogen (Imogen). Conversely, in the induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, he has a page disguise himself as a Lady; in casting the amateur performance of Pyramus and Thisbe, Flute is assigned to play the woman's part, presumably because he is so young he does not yet have a beard (*Dream* 1.2.39). Flute's name identifies the central resemblance between women and boys: 'fluting', high-pitched voices.

Both witty pages and witty young women deal in the pretty, precious and precocious; like the child stars of modern film and television, they amuse audiences by displaying an impertinent intelligence, a witty insubordination, even at times a talent for sexual innuendo, not expected from and deliciously incongruous in such mouths. Like boys, women characters also often exist chiefly for musical purposes: Mortimer's wife 'sings a Welsh song' (1 *Henry IV* 3.1.238.1), Marina and her 'companion maid' sing to Pericles (5.1.73), and songs are required of such minor characters as Dorcas and Mopsa in *The Winter's Tale*, Queen Katherine's anonymous 'gentlewoman' in *All Is True*, and the goddess Hecate in Middleton's additions to *Macbeth*. In addition to singing, women and boys also contributed another characteristic sound effect to early modern performances: ululation. 'A cry within of women', signalling the death of Lady Macbeth (5.5.7.1), is a gendered sound effect, like 'Alarum within' (1.2.0.1). Unlike men but like boys, women were allowed – indeed, expected – to weep easily; like the orphaned children of Clarence in *Richard III* (who serve no other purpose), they often added cries and sighs, shrieking and sobbing to the aural texture of a performance. Helena begins *All's Well That Ends Well* weeping; Cassandra makes her first entrance with a 'shriek' (*Troilus* 2.2.96). Because they specialise in unrestrained lamentation, female characters often embody impotent grief:

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Constance in *King John*, the Queen in *Richard II*, Lady Percy in 2 *Henry IV*, can only ‘weep like a young wench that had buried her grandam’ (*Two Gentlemen* 2.1.20), or ‘weeping die’ (*Errors* 2.1.113).

The association of women and grief was not simply aural. Like the boys who played them, Shakespeare’s women are physically and socially more vulnerable than men. Hence, like boys, women in Shakespeare make good victims, whether as protagonists (the sleepwalking suicidal Lady Macbeth) or subordinates (Lady Macduff, who exists only to be murdered). Cleopatra, characteristically, does not die alone; Iras precedes her, Charmian follows, giving an audience three dead women in thirty-five lines. ‘Under a compelling occasion, let women die’, Enobarbus had joked, but it is not just Cleopatra who has ‘a celerity in dying’ (*Antony* 1.2.134–40). *Othello* ends with two innocent female corpses on stage. The raped and mutilated Lavinia, having been displayed for five scenes, is finally killed by her father near the end of *Titus Andronicus*; Juliet’s is the last, climactic death in the Capulet tomb; Gertrude’s death, the turning point in the final scene of *Hamlet*, is arguably its least complicated and most poignant moment. Even when women do not die on stage, their reported or apparent or expected deaths produce similar moments of pathos. Queen Anne in *Richard III* knows that her husband ‘will, no doubt, shortly be rid of me’ (4.1.87); the ‘distraught’ Portia’s ‘grief’ drives her to suicide (*Caesar* 4.3.153–5); the discarded innocent Queen Katherine of *All Is True* closes act 4 anticipating her burial; the apparent deaths of innocent wronged Hero in *Much Ado* and innocent young Thaisa in *Pericles* may affect an audience as much as any ‘real’ on-stage death.

Finally, Shakespeare’s most demanding female characters, like his most demanding boy characters, combine the different talents that might be expected of the best boy actors. Ophelia sings, weeps and dies. In her first scene, Hermione is as witty as the wittiest page; that wit stokes her husband’s jealousy, which gives the boy actor plenty of opportunities for pathos. Cleopatra, too, is witty, bawdy, and finally dead: unlike the ‘squeaking Cleopatra’ whom she fears to see ‘boy [her] greatness/I’th’posture of a whore’ (*Antony* 5.2.219–20), the boy who played her must have been able to control his voice (so that it did not, as the voices of adolescent boys often do, unpredictably squeak), and he must have been capable of more than one ‘posture’. And although no actress has ever founded a great reputation on playing Desdemona, it gave boy actors the opportunity to display all their virtues. To the dismay of many subsequent critics, Desdemona, like an impertinent boy, engages in witty bawdy banter with Iago (*Othello* 2.1.123–71); later, she is given the opportunity to sing (4.3.38–54) – ‘and she can weep, sir, weep’, Othello informs us, and then directs her ‘Proceed you in your tears’ (4.1.245–7). She also dies on stage, a pathetically innocent victim; indeed, the

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player gets to die not once but twice in the same scene. The emotional effect of the boy actor's performance of her deaths was recorded by an eye-witness in Oxford in September 1610:

In the last few days the King's players have been here. They acted with enormous applause to full houses . . . They had tragedies (too) which they acted with skill and decorum and in which some things, both speech and action, brought forth tears. – Moreover, that famous Desdemona killed before us by her husband, although she always acted her whole part supremely well, yet when she was killed she was even more moving, for when she fell back upon the bed she implored the pity of the spectators by her very face.¹

No actress in the role could accomplish more. Indeed, no actress could accomplish so much, because part of the boy actor's admired virtuosity was his very capacity to make spectators regard him as 'she'. In addition to creating opportunities for banter, singing, weeping, and dying, the role of Desdemona gave its first performer the opportunity to enact femaleness. An actress playing Desdemona can be applauded for dying pathetically, but unlike a boy actor she will not be applauded for gender-switching.

Desdemona speaks only 2,760 words, less than 11 percent of the play's text. The male spectator at Oxford found her most compelling when she was dead silent. Although boy actors may have been precociously talented, they did not have the same capabilities as adults, and neither do Shakespeare's female characters. Shakespeare wrote 1,000 words more for Rosalind than for any other female character, but 'she' speaks many of those as a male ('Ganymede'). Like Portia and Viola and Imogen, Rosalind/Ganymede was written to be played by the company's most experienced boy actor – who by definition would have been pushing the chronological and physical limits of his capacity to impersonate the women convincingly. That is why Shakespeare has Rosalind describe herself as 'more than common tall' (*As You Like It* 1.3.105).

The boy-girl compound called Rosalind/Ganymede speaks considerably less than half as much as Hamlet (for whom Shakespeare wrote 11,563 words). No female role approaches the size of the great roles Shakespeare created for Burbage. Even a character like Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, notorious for her tongue, speaks far fewer words (1,759) than Petruccio (4,605), or even Tranio (2,256). If the script overtaxed a juvenile memory, then the boy might well – like Mote, introducing the masque of Muscovites in *Love's Labour's Lost* – forget his lines, thereby disgracing himself and his whole company (5.2.160–73). Shakespeare never wrote a female role like Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, or like Middleton and Dekker's Moll Frith in *The Roaring Girl*. Moreover, he always wrote for companies with more adult