THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO

SHAKESPEARE ON STAGE

EDITED BY

STANLEY WELLS
Chairman, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

and

SARAH STANTON
Cambridge University Press

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Sabon 10/13 pt. *System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

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

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

The Cambridge companion to Shakespeare on stage / edited by Stanley Wells and
Sarah Stanton.
p. cm. (Cambridge companions to literature)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 79295 9 (hardback) – ISBN 0 521 79711 X (paperback)
1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616 – Stage history. I. Wells, Stanley W., 1930–
II. Stanton, Sarah. III. Series.
PR3091.C36 2002
792.9′5 – dc21 2001052447

ISBN 0 521 79295 9 hardback
ISBN 0 521 79711 X paperback

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1

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.

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 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, 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 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 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 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), 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:

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 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 actors than boys; consequently, few if any of his own scripts require more than four boy actors, and he never wrote anything like the christening scene (3.2) in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, which has eleven speaking female characters on stage simultaneously.

Shakespeare's company was not only homogeneously male, it was also homogeneously Anglo-Saxon. That did not prevent Shakespeare from creating ethnic or racial fictions, any more than the absence of real women prevented him from creating fictional females. But Shakespeare knew that 'black Othello' (2.3.27) would be played by white Burbage. Indeed, when Burbage/Othello said that his reputation was 'now begrimed and black/As mine own face' (3.3.388–9), Shakespeare described a black man's complexion as though it were produced by smearing grime (soot, coal dust) on a formerly white surface; every early modern Othello was not just metaphorically but literally 'sooty' (1.2.70). In the same Christmas season that *Othello* was first performed at court, the faces, hands and bare arms of Queen Anne and eleven other ladies were – as scandalised observers reported – 'painted black' for their appearance in Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*. Shakespeare, like Jonson, wrote for white actors painted black; his plays belong to the theatrical genre of blackface (and were widely adopted and adapted by blackface theatre and burlesque in the nineteenth century). Moreover, his blackface roles were apparently written for different actors: Othello for Burbage, Cleopatra for a boy actor, the one-scene comic part of Morocco perhaps for a hired man, the major but not leading role of Aaron for some sharer other than Burbage, the mute 'blackamoors with music' probably for hired musicians (*Love's Labour's Lost* 5.2.156.1). No one, apparently, specialised in black characters. Any actor could play them, because anyone could paint his face black. Likewise, any actor could paint his face 'tawny' to play Spaniards, like Aragon or Armado, or the characters of the 'Black House' in Middleton's (the King's Men's) *A Game at Chess*. Any actor could put on a 'jew's nose' (one of Henslowe's properties) to play Marlowe's Barabas or Shakespeare's Shylock. Shakespeare wrote for stages where racial and ethnic differences were mimicked by Anglo-Saxon actors for Anglo-Saxon audiences.

Worn identities: clothes and accessories

Identities constituted by race or gender were, for Shakespeare and his acting company, prosthetic. They were created by adding something artificial – false breasts, soot – to the 'natural' template of the white male body. Of all such prosthetic devices, the most important were clothes and the accessories that went with clothes. The area directly behind the stage, where actors prepared for their entrances, was called the 'tiring-house', a place for putting on and taking off attire. According to a poem attributed to Sir Walter Raleigh, 'Our mothers' wombs the tiring-houses be / Where we are dressed for life's short comedy'; if a play is born in performance, its gestation takes place in the tiring-house, where each character is fitted with an identity. Shylock enters, wearing a 'Jewish gaberdine' (*Merchant of Venice* 1.3.104); in the next scene '*the Prince of Morocco, a tawny Moor all in white*', enters (the prescribed whiteness of his clothing emphasising the darkness of his skin), wearing a 'scimitar' (2.1.0.1–2, 2.1.24) – the same kind of sword worn by another 'Moor', Aaron, in *Titus Andronicus* (4.2.91).

We tend to think of the number of characters in a play as a function of the number of available actors; but that was not true on early modern stages. 'One man', Jaques tells us, 'plays many parts' (*As You Like It* 2.7.142). Indeed, the actor who played Jaques might also have played Denis and/or Le Beau and/or William in the same play. But Denis would have been dressed as a serving man; Monsieur Le Beau, as a French courtier; William, as a peasant; Jaques first appears dressed as a forester (2.5.0.1), but he probably wore something more particular than that, reflecting the distinctive 'melancholy of mine own' of which he is so proud (4.1.15). One character is distinguished from another not by the differences between one actor's body and another actor's body, but by the difference between one outfit and another; one actor could have served for Denis, Le Beau, William and Jaques, but one costume could not. Thus, the number of roles in a play was, for playing companies and their playwrights, a function of the number of costumes. Identity was sartorially constructed.

That is one reason why companies paid more for new clothes than for new scripts. Shakespeare wrote only 134 words for the god Hymen to speak (and another thirty-three to be sung, probably chorally) – but unlike Denis, Le Beau or William, the small role of Hymen required an impressive special costume. For the same god, the printed text of Jonson's *Hymenai* (written to be read by people who had not seen the performance) specified 'a saffron-coloured robe, his under-vesture white, his socks yellow, a yellow veil of silk on his left arm'. The impression made by Hymen in performance depended (and still depends) more upon the wardrobe and the music room than on the playwright.

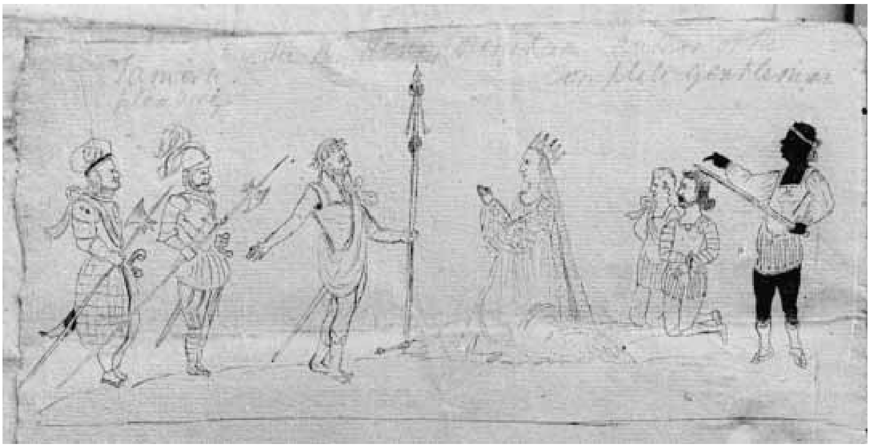
A new play usually cost £6; by contrast, the actor Edward Alleyn owned a single 'black velvet cloak with sleeves, embroidered all with silver and gold' that cost £20 10s 6d. The Earl of Leicester regularly paid more for a doublet or cloak than Shakespeare paid for New Place in Stratford. Since Shakespeare's plays, like those of his contemporaries, regularly brought earls, dukes and even kings on stage, they had to reproduce convincingly the splendour of contemporary aristocratic dress. In a world without synthetic fabrics or cheap mass-produced apparel, such splendour could only be represented by expensive fabrics, in many cases by the actual articles of clothing formerly worn by the nobility. For performances of Middleton's *A Game at Chess*, the King's Men acquired a 'cast suit' – that is, a used and discarded outfit – of the Spanish ambassador. A quarter of a century earlier, Thomas Platter (a Swiss traveller who visited England in 1599 and saw *Julius Caesar* performed by the Chamberlain's Men) reported that

> The actors are most expensively and elaborately costumed; for it is the English usage for eminent lords or knights at their decease to bequeath and leave almost the best of their clothes to their serving men, which it is unseemly for the latter to wear, so that they offer them then for sale ... to the actors.[2]

The circulation of rich apparel was undoubtedly more complex than Platter realised. Indeed, the early modern economy of England depended upon the production and distribution of worked cloth; increasingly, the London cloth trade created and satisfied a demand for sartorial novelty, for the changing fashions satirised in plays like Middleton's *Your Five Gallants* (which begins in a pawnshop). The actors Platter saw were themselves, technically, 'serving men' to 'eminent lords'; Shakespeare's company in 1599 wore the livery of the Lord Chamberlain, and later of the King. Expensive clothes could be given or bought, but they could also be rented or pawned. Henslowe combined the professions of theatrical impresario and pawnbroker, while the royal Office of the Revels not only supplied clothes for performances at court, but rented them to playing companies at other times.

Clothing was so important to the actors because it so quickly and efficiently established recognisable social identities: gender, status, occupation, wealth. As Polonius declares, 'the apparel oft proclaims the man' (*Hamlet* 1.3.72). Of course, we hear this having already heard, in the preceding scene, Hamlet's acid 'I have that within which passeth show' (1.2.85). But theatrically Polonius was right. After all, 'the trappings and the suits of woe' (1.2.86) do accurately communicate Hamlet's inner state to the audience, not only because of their normal social significance, but because theatrically they contrast so strikingly with the celebratory royal wedding clothes of the other characters on stage with him.

Hamlet's apparel proclaims the man, but not the period. Although the plot (like the source story) belongs to an epoch many centuries before, when England paid tribute to Denmark, the characters wear Elizabethan clothes. On early modern stages, the immediate legibility of clothing, an audience's ability to read the social and emotional meaning of sartorial signs,



1 A contemporary drawing of *Titus Andronicus*, by Henry Peacham.

mattered more than archaeological accuracy. Given the importance of Latin to Elizabethan education, many spectators might be expected to know a little about the ancient classical world, but in *Julius Caesar* antique Romans anachronistically wear modern hats, doublets, cloaks, nightgowns, kerchiefs and braces (and hear clocks strike). A drawing of *Titus Andronicus*, probably made between 1604 and 1615, shows Titus in laurel crown, tunic, toga, and sandals, holding a ceremonial spear; but everyone else is in 'modern dress'. The principle unifying these eclectic vestments is instant intelligibility: a few signs that say 'ancient Rome', others that say 'queen', 'soldier', 'prisoner', 'Moor'.

The other striking feature of this drawing is a complete absence of background. *Titus* was performed by London actors in the household of Sir John Harington, at Burley-on-the-Hill in Rutland, on 1 January 1596; an eyewitness wrote that 'the spectacle has more value than the subject'.[3] But in Shakespeare and Peele's play 'the spectacle' was provided entirely by actors. One man's costume illustrates the grandeur that was Rome; one man's skin colour displays the exoticism of a far-flung empire; 'others as many as can be' (according to the stage direction at 1.1.69) carry as many halberds and swords as possible, dozens representing legions. Writing masques for the royal court, Ben Jonson could summon up dazzling scenes and machines, but that forced him to collaborate, not once or twice but continually, with the architect Inigo Jones; eventually the scenewright dominated and displaced the playwright. By contrast, Shakespeare, an actor himself, wrote for a company of actors.

The centrality of the actor

Actors did not have to compete with scenery; actors *were* scenery. Scenery that moved. In *Othello*, a handkerchief passes from an Egyptian to Othello's mother to Othello to his wife Desdemona to her servant Emilia to her husband Iago to his fellow-soldier Cassio to his mistress Bianca, then back to Cassio; early modern relationships were traced, on stage and off, by movements of cloth. But actors described and executed those movements. They carried the handkerchief. For the final scene a bed must be 'thrust out' on to the stage or 'discovered' behind an arras, but the Folio stage direction reads simply '*Enter Othello, and Desdemona in her bed*' (5.2.0), subordinating the bed to the entrance of Desdemona, as though the furniture were a servant or an accessory. Desdemona enters wearing a bed, just as she wears a nightgown.

Both the bed and the nightgown emphasise Desdemona's vulnerability; they signal the intimacy of a private space where she should be safe, and thereby contribute to the pathos of the actor's performance, described by that eye-witness in Oxford. Actors were not only scenery that physically moved, they were scenery that moved emotionally. Thomas Nashe, in the earliest description of audiences' responses to a play at least partly by Shakespeare, claimed in 1592 that the death of Talbot in *The First Part of Henry the Sixth* elicited 'the tears of ten thousand spectators at least'. Forty years later, an encomiast claimed that a spectator, watching Shakespeare's characters on stage, 'Joys in their joy, and trembles at their rage', crediting Shakespeare with an ability 'To steer th'affections'.[4] The early modern playwright, according to his contemporaries, was an engineer of affect. The King's Men played *Othello*, the Oxford eye-witness tells us, 'with enormous applause to full houses'. Despite the disapproval of preachers and city authorities, despite the risk of physical infection or moral corruption, people flocked to see plays; by one estimate, there were perhaps 50 million individual visits to the commercial theatres between 1580 and 1642. People were willing to pay to have their feelings artificially stimulated by fictions. Plays did that better than other texts, in part because, as Francis Bacon observed, 'the minds of men in company are more open to affections and impressions than when alone'.[5] When full, an amphitheatre like the Globe may have contained as many as 3,000 spectators, each contributing to the emotional feedback loop described by Bacon. For the first time in human history, the early modern theatre capitalised, and routinised, the commodification of emotion.

Consequently, Shakespeare's most often quoted line, in early modern England, was not Hamlet's intellectual meditative 'To be or not to be' but Richard III's passionate, desperate 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!' One witness reports that 'Burbage cried' out this line; another writes of the actor/character 'in his heat of passion . . . troubled many ways, crying' out the words. Like the elegy which remembers Burbage's performance of 'kind Lear, the grieved Moor', such testimony confirms the emotional emphasis and power of Burbage's acting style.[6] But it also confirms the centrality of the actor. 'Sit in a full theatre', Sir Thomas Overbury wrote, 'and you will think you see so many lines drawn from the circumference of so many ears, whiles the actor is the centre.'[7] As soon as Shakespeare completed a full draft of the script, it would have been copied and parcelled out as a collection of 'parts' for individual actors to read and memorise; rather than a copy of the whole play, each actor received only a text of his own speeches, and the cues for them. Presumably the longest parts, like Burbage's, were copied first, so that the actors with the most to memorise could begin the soonest.

The centrality of the actor produced a corresponding centrality of character. Shakespeare wrote texts which he expected to circulate, not in the form of printed books, but as parts, minimally linked components organised by role – not acts, scenes, locations, plots or subplots, but roles for individual actors, actors who would focus on their own responsibilities and opportunities, and trust others to take care of the rest. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare was most admired for his creation of characters: he was, primarily, the creator of Falstaff (a.k.a. Oldcastle), rather than the author of something called *The History of Henry the Fourth*. The memory of Burbage was inextricably bound to a set of individual fictional persons: Richard III, Lear, Othello, Hamlet.

> Oft have I seen him leap into the grave –
> Suiting the person (which he seemed to have)
> Of a sad lover with so true an eye
> That there I would have sworn he meant to die . . .

By about 1600, acting was no longer considered a mere subcategory of oratory, but an art of 'personation'; Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* demanded that a good actor should 'qualify everything according to the nature of the person personated'.[8]

Burbage was emotionally moving, but he was also constantly in motion. Performances were regulated backstage by a 'plat', which reduced each play to its spine, a series of necessary entrances. Actors had to get on to the stage at the right moment, from the right direction; once on stage, an actor might remain still, but to get off stage he had to move again, and any intervening stillness stood out partly by contrast with the fundamental law of flow. Props therefore had to be portable, carried on and off the stage in the same movements that brought actors on and off.

Laws of perpetual motion governed more than the structure of performance. For Shakespeare's working life, every day the acting company would perform a different play; even the most popular plays would normally be performed only once a week; the first recorded 'long run', Middleton's *A Game at Chess* in August 1624, ran for nine consecutive days – an achievement so remarkable it was trumpeted on title pages. Plays, like actors, had their exits and their entrances.

Revivals and reputations

Many of Shakespeare's plays remained in the repertory of the King's Men for years. But revivals were no more static than any other aspect of playing. Actors retired, or died, and had to be replaced; boy actors grew up. Costumes wore out, or ceased to be appropriately fashionable. Worcester's Men, reviving the collaborative play *Sir John Oldcastle* in 1602–3, paid £15 10s for new costumes – more than six times what they paid for revisions and additions to the text.

But they did pay for changes to the text. 'New additions' were regularly attached to popular old plays, like Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*; any play that stayed in the repertory long enough would almost certainly be subject to textual change. Shakespeare himself added a scene to the original version of *Titus Andronicus*. In 1606, Parliament passed a law 'to restrain the abuses of players', which set heavy fines for actors who uttered the name of God on stage; Shakespeare's earlier plays had been full of profanity, as defined by that statute, and had to be retrospectively purged in revivals. Beginning in 1609, older plays, designed for uninterrupted performance, had to be provided with appropriate act breaks. In the edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* published in 1600, the action is uninterrupted from the entrance of Lysander (3.2.412.2) to the exit of Bottom (4.1.211.1), 263 lines later; in the 1623 edition, the play is divided into five acts, and an extra stage direction is added at 3.2.460.1, just before the beginning of act 4, specifying that '*They sleep all the Act*' (meaning, through the act interval). Shakespeare may or may not have been responsible for this change, but he apparently did, in about 1610, revise the text of *King Lear* for a revival, and that revision includes added act breaks. The added interval before what became act 4 coincides with omission of the dialogue between two servants that originally ended 3.7; that dialogue was no longer needed, because the interval gave the actor playing Gloucester time to exit, change clothes, put plasters on his eyes, and re-enter at 4.1.6.1. Shakespeare could therefore end the scene (and the act) with the devastating spectacle of Gloucester's blind exit while servants carry out a corpse.

But after Shakespeare retired and died, any changes for revivals would have to be scripted by someone else. The King's Men appear to have hired Middleton to adapt *Macbeth*, in about 1616: two songs, the goddess Hecate and some spectacular effects were added, moving the play decisively in the direction of baroque opera – innovations later endorsed, and expanded, by Restoration adaptations. To make room for all the resulting extra parts for boy actors, the three witches were transformed from 'fair nymphs' (seen by play-goer Simon Forman in 1611) into the ambiguously gendered women-with-beards familiar to us, who can be played by adult actors. He was also probably responsible for cutting the play, giving it the elliptical tightness so characteristic of his own style (and so uncharacteristic of Shakespeare's more expansive dramatic style). Middleton's apparent success with *Macbeth* may have prompted the King's Men to hire him again, in 1621, to adapt *Measure for Measure*: he expanded the city comedy parts of Lucio, Overdone and Pompey, and transformed a play apparently originally set in Italy into one located in Vienna at the outset of the Thirty Years' War. He also reshaped the play's structure, originally intended for uninterrupted performance, to accommodate act intervals. He transposed the third and fourth scenes to end act 1 with suspense about Isabella's mission to Angelo; he also divided the play's original long central scene into two scenes, transposing two of the Duke's speeches, and adding the song and initial dialogue that begins act 4.[9]

Of course, no company would go to the expense of reviving a play unless it had once been popular, and might be popular again. Judging by allusions to his work, Jonson was the playwright most widely admired by critics in the seventeenth century, but he was only intermittently successful in the theatres. Judging by the number of reprints in the period 1580 to 1660, Shakespeare wrote nothing as popular as Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, or the anonymous *Mucedorus*. He did write two of the ten bestselling plays (but so did Heywood). Shakespeare's most popular plays, in descending order, were apparently *1 Henry IV*, *Richard III*, *Pericles*, *Hamlet, Richard II* and *Romeo and Juliet*. With the exception of *Pericles* (a collaboration with Wilkins), all of these were written between 1593–4 (*Richard III*) and 1600–1 (*Hamlet*). During that period – when Marlowe, Kyd and Greene were dead, but Jonson, Middleton and Fletcher had not yet replaced them – Shakespeare was undoubtedly London's dominant playwright.

But that dominance did not last. The waning of his theatrical clout can be measured, in part, by the history of performances at court. In the Christmas season of 1604/5, seven plays by Shakespeare, and two by Jonson, entertained the royal family. This is the high-water mark of Shakespeare's popularity, accurately reflecting his theatrical dominance in the last decade of Elizabeth I's reign. In the scanty records of the next five years, the one known

Shakespeare play at court (*King Lear*) is matched by one known Middleton play (*A Trick to Catch the Old One*). In 1611/12, Shakespeare gets two, but so does Fletcher; in 1612/13, Shakespeare gets nine, and Fletcher eight, in addition to their first collaboration, *Cardenio*. Shakespeare's last three plays (*Cardenio, Henry VIII/All Is True*, and *Two Noble Kinsmen*) were co-written with Fletcher, handing the baton to his younger rival and obvious successor. Records for the next few years are scant, but after 1619 Fletcher was consistently more popular: fourteen recorded court performances (to Shakespeare's three) in the 1620s, thirty-one (to Shakespeare's ten) from 1630 to 1642. When the King's Men performed *The Taming of the Shrew* and then Fletcher's feminist reply to it, *The Tamer Tamed*, at court on 26 and 28 November 1633, Shakespeare's play was merely 'liked', but Fletcher's 'very well liked'.

Fletcher's dominance, established by 1620, continued for the rest of the seventeenth century, and not only at court. In the three decades after 1632, ten Shakespeare plays were reprinted, each in a single quarto; but Fletcher's *Comedies and Tragedies* were published in folio, and eighteen individual plays appeared in thirty-eight different quartos. In the 1640s and 1650s, actors trying to defy the parliamentary closure of the theatres reached for Fletcher, not Shakespeare. In London, five different attempts to reopen the theatres between 1647 and 1654 showcased Fletcher. No one was willing to take such risks for a play by Shakespeare. When the actors and the King did finally return, in 1660, two different companies performed seventeen revivals of Fletcher, but only four of Shakespeare.

But the Restoration is another chapter. This chapter of the relationship between Shakespeare's plays and the stage ends, instead, with small groups of itinerate actors, like those common in Shakespeare's childhood, scratching a living from minimalist performances in rowdy fairgrounds, halls and taverns. Deprived of their proud and ornate London theatres, in the lean years between 1642 and 1660 the acting companies reverted to their vagabond heritage, performing what Francis Kirkman called 'pieces of plays', excerpts of the most popular scenes from old reliables. Of the twenty-six such 'drolls' Kirkman collected, the greatest number (nine) came from the Fletcher canon, but Shakespeare did furnish three: 'The Merry Conceits of Bottom the Weaver', 'The Bouncing Knight', and 'The Grave-Makers'. All three came from plays – *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Henry the Fourth* and *Hamlet* – performed at court in the 1630s, suggesting that the court's taste in Shakespeare did not much differ from that of the general public. All three, too, come from Shakespeare's late Elizabethan glory days.

In the mid-1590s, a hand-picked company of professional actors, performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in their own large London theatre, had demonstrated their confident virtuosity by mocking the incompetence of amateur thespians. By the 1650s that dream was in pieces. In 'The Merry Conceits of Bottom the Weaver', nothing was left of Shakespeare's play but the scenes featuring the 'hard-handed men that work' in the city (5.1.72), and those were described as having been 'lately, privately, presented by several apprentices for their harmless recreation, with great applause'.[10] The mechanicals had taken over.

NOTES

1 Gāmini Salgādo (ed.), *Eyewitnesses to Shakespeare: First-Hand Accounts of Performances, 1590–1890* (London: Sussex University Press, 1975), 30.

2 Ernest Schanzer, 'Thomas Platter's Observations on the Elizabethan Stage', *Notes and Queries* 201 (1956), 465–7.

3 Gustav Ungerer, 'An Unrecorded Elizabethan Performance of *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Studies* 14 (1961), 102.

4 See Gary Taylor, 'Feeling Bodies' in *Shakespeare in the Twentieth Century: Proceedings of the Sixth World Shakespeare Congress*, ed. Jonathan Bate *et al.* (Newark: University of Delaware Press and London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 259.

5 Francis Bacon, *The Proficience and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Human* (1605), II, 13.

6 C. C. Stopes, *Burbage and Shakespeare's Stage* (London, 1913), 118.

7 'An excellent Actor' in Sir Thomas Overbury [and others], *His Wife. With Addition of… divers more Characters* (1616), sig. M2.

8 Thomas Heywood, *Apology for Actors* (1612), sig. C4.

9 See Gary Taylor and John Jowett, *Shakespeare Reshaped*, 1606–1623 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 107–236; Gary Taylor, 'Shakespeare's Mediterranean "Measure for Measure"', *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*, ed. Thomas Clayton *et al.* (Newark: University of Delaware Press and London: Associated University Presses, forthcoming); and *Measure for Measure*, ed. John Jowett, in Thomas Middleton, *Collected Works*, general editor Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

10 Gary Jay Williams, *Our Moonlight Revels: 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' in the Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 38–40.